

Where I Come From: Place, Race, Memory and Experience in Rap and Country Music – A Comparative Study

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Note: The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols used in the original document have not transferred successfully to this version and should therefore be ignored.

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I want to examine certain lyrical elements in rap and country music and the ways they are voiced. As different as these genres are from each other they share certain important characteristics. The main themes I will focus on are place, race, memory and experience. I will also look at how these themes are used in the creation of authenticity and how authenticity is seen as crucial within these genres.

Though common themes are present in my chosen genres there are also numerous polarities that are readily identifiable. They are simplistic but constitute a kind of received wisdom or “common sense” that, while it invites debate, remains pervasive. They include: specific landscapes evoked via soundscapes, the “street” sound of the city in rap or the “open” sound of the rural in country; racial divides - rap is black, country white; socio-political issues - action in rap, reaction in country; age - rap is young, country old. That these simplifications are contestable is clear and I hope to challenge them while also highlighting them as elements we are aware of when we examine our expectations of what certain musics will sound like before any individuation within certain performances. When Garth Brooks opens his album *The Chase* with a gospel song (‘We Shall Be Free’), when Chuck Berry performs a tune like ‘Johnny B. Goode’ in “hillbilly” style, or when we note the ethnicity of a Charley Pride or an Eminem, we register brief challenges to our expectations of what the musics these artists are engaged in “should” deliver, in these cases racial expectations largely built up and maintained by ethnographically- and demographically-obsessed culture industries.

Clearly such expectations relate to the ways in which definitions of genre are constructed. Such constructions can be seen as ideological and it is no coincidence that a lot of the efforts made by academics to explain how and why genre cultures work focus on analyses of the workings of the music industry and/or studies of fan scenes.¹ However, my concern in this dissertation is with what is often left out of such approaches, namely the music itself. Steve Neale, when looking for a way to describe film genres without relying solely on textual features, suggests that genres are ‘systems of orientations, expectations and

conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject'.² I see a lot of sense in this definition yet feel that, in popular music studies, a lot is said about industry and subject and not enough about text. Furthermore, I feel that it is often within and around the textual elements of genres that innovation and change primarily occur in popular music. When “rules” are transgressed, though the transgression might be initiated from above (changes in company policy affecting types of music being produced), from below (grass roots innovations turning fans into musicians) or from somewhere in between (artists experimenting with the limits of their form), it is at the site of the text that they show most pertinently. I do not wish to ignore the importance of extra-textual elements, such as commercial considerations, but rather to highlight the effects such considerations have on the texts produced. From a level of textual analysis such as that proposed and exemplified in Richard Middleton’s recent edition of *Popular Music* essays, it is both possible and potentially rewarding to move from the work itself to wider considerations.

The musical text is, of course, a multifaceted construction and I am neglecting a lot of potentially useful analysis by restricting my analysis to voice and lyric. I will not completely dispense with discussion of instrumental features but they will be largely bypassed to highlight what I see as the importance of lyrical content, vocal timbre, structure, pitch and microphone technique. These are important elements of all vocal music yet have a special relevance in my chosen genres. As Keith Negus points out, to their detriment ‘both rap and country are judged [by music industry marketers] to be “too dependent on the lyrics” or “the vocals” and are considered to foreground the voice and lyrical content in a way that people from other parts of the world “can’t relate to”’.

Arguments can be made for and against the usefulness of studying lyric in song analysis. A general trend in popular music studies has been away from lyrical analysis to attempts at musicology that all but negate lyrical content. Fortunately there steps in between these extremes. Timothy D. Taylor’s examination of ‘Johnny B. Goode’ and Peter Winkler’s of Randy Newman’s work are two good examples of mixing lyrical with musical content to useful effect.³ They establish important themes and it is with lyrical themes and preoccupations that rap and country have a surprising amount in common. They are linked, for example, by a certain parochialism and are often self-referential. In rap it is

commonplace for an individual or posse to both extol their own virtues and denigrate their competitors, a practice deriving from Jamaican “toasting” and the highly charged competitive atmosphere of “open mic” hip-hop events. Particular styles of rapping or DJ-ing are vaunted, with emphasis placed on both evolution and revolution, how a style fits with what has gone before and breaks new ground. Meanwhile country music boasts a wide variety of songs about country music and about finding one’s place within a tradition. It is with this sense of community and place that Chapter One deals, along with the attendant ties of ethnic belonging.

Part of the parochialism in both musics can be traced to their preoccupation with lived experience, another theme that gives importance to the lyrical style and content found in each genre. In individual songs a storytelling style can be detected that is more overt than in most other genres of popular music. Individual songs can also be seen to reflect more general themes. It can be argued that a rap narrative dealing with the sense of lack, desire and eventual achievement felt by an individual also tells of the wider black experience in America. Similarly a southern country song dealing with individual loss and nostalgia can be seen to embody the loss of a certain way of life dating back at least to defeat in the Civil war. There is consequently an implicit temptation to link narratives with personal experience, to treat vocalist and narrator as one and the same. Memory plays an important role in the presentation of lived experience and is an important element in both genres, whether it be the “technostalgia” of rap music (deployed via the recycling of previous sounds and “back in the day” lyrics) or the often sentimental nostalgia found in country songs. Chapter Two addresses these related elements and extends the ideas of belonging introduced in the first chapter to highlight the ways in which memory helps maintain tradition.

In Chapter Three I look at authenticity and the ways it is maintained by rap and country artists and audiences with specific reference to the themes already introduced. To help with this I utilise some of the suggestions put forward by Richard A. Peterson in his work on “hard-core” and “soft-shell” country performers and audiences. In this work Peterson is concerned more with a “production of culture” thesis than with specific textual readings (though he has also co-edited a book on lyrical themes in country music⁴). The dialectic at play between the hard-core and soft-shell styles has major implications for the way country music is produced, marketed and distributed at both local and

international levels and shows the way the stylistics of genres can change according to the rules of commerce and mass appeal. Peterson also suggests that ‘most, if not all, forms of music have equivalent soft-shell and hard-core varieties’.⁵ I attempt to apply this approach to rap music, relating what I find in my chosen texts to comments made by Nelson George, Tricia Rose and Paul Gilroy about the construction of identity within the music and the restrictions imposed on its practitioners (the so-called “rap trap”).

With the issue of authenticity in mind it is worth pointing out at this stage that, when talking about rap and country music in this study, I am talking predominantly about North American (and specifically US) rap and country. While it has long been evident that the audiences for both genres are global, there is often an assumption that the authentic producers of these genres (and therefore the rightful “owners” of the genre labels) are still American. As the recent study *Global Noise* illustrates, rap music in particular has generated a large number of performers from countries other than the USA who have managed to redefine rap by localising it. Tony Mitchell, the book’s editor, even suggests that global rap is more relevant than that of the USA and is capable of outlasting it.⁶ Similarly, the recent popularity of “Alternative Country” has seen numerous country-styled groups appearing from countries outside the USA. While I will be briefly mentioning British rap and country later, this dissertation is a study of the American (i.e., US-based) forms of these genres. Hopefully many of the points made about place, race, memory, identity and authenticity will be at least equally relevant to the global forms of these musics. In the meantime I do not intend to refer to “American” or “US” rap or country music but to allow the genre labels to retain their widely accepted geographical rootedness.

A note on song citations. Because of the importance placed on lyrics in this dissertation I have felt it crucial, when quoting from songs, to reproduce the lyrics that are actually sung/rapped on the recordings used for reference. Therefore, while CD liners reproducing lyrics and internet resources such as the invaluable *Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive* have been consulted during my research, I have adjusted any reproductions that proved inaccurate (though I have kept idiosyncratic spellings where they have been presented as such in CD liner notes

and not inserted “[sic]”). All lyrics quoted in the following chapters are therefore transcriptions and are footnoted as follows:

Artist, ‘Song Title’, Track number on album [unless indicated as a single], *Album Title* (Record label and catalogue number, Year of release of edition used) [record label and year of original release if different from edition used].

Songs which appear additionally on the accompanying CD are given the further reference “DCD” and a track number. In some cases a time reference is given to facilitate locating the textual element under analysis. [The word “excerpt” in square brackets indicates that only a portion of the song cited has been presented on the CD].

Notes

¹ Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock ‘n’ Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000).

² Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 19.

³ Timothy D. Taylor, ‘His Name Was In Lights: Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode”’ in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music* ed. by Richard Middleton (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 165-182; Peter Winkler, ‘Randy Newman’s Americana’ in the same collection, pp.27-57

⁴ Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992).

⁵ Richard A. Peterson, ‘The Dialectic of Hard-Core and Soft-Shell Country Music’ in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars and Honky-Tonk Bars* ed. by Cecilia Tichi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 255 (endnote).

⁶ Tony Mitchell, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 2-3.

CHAPTER ONE

PLACE AND RACE

As musical styles rap and country are products of a long history of interaction within the North American continent. The strands that came together to form these particular hybrids, be they of European, African or American origin, are interwoven to such an extent that to claim any sort of purity, racial or otherwise, in either genre would seem an impossibility. Yet, not only are such claims made, but the thinking behind them has been “naturalised” to such an extent that, though they may be questioned, they are seldom dispelled. The academic discipline of popular music studies has tended to acknowledge but ultimately bypass arguments such as those made by Philip Tagg that question the use of terms such as “black music” and “white music”.¹ This is possibly in recognition of the fact that those involved in both the production and reception of popular music have hung on to such terms and, in so doing, kept them relevant. This is far more so with the former term than the latter: “white music” is less often used as a term than implied as a concept. I will return to some of the issues raised by “black” and “white” music later but first I think it is worth delineating the importance of place in the genres under discussion here.

One of the points Tagg makes is the way in which “black music” has become equated with ‘the music of dark-skinned people in the USA and nowhere else in the world’. He notes how such a concept ties in with other assumed equations of the USA with the world and how ‘this “World = USA” notion recurs frequently in US popular song’. This point serves as a reminder that, for all the musicological evidence to support anti-essentialist arguments like Tagg’s, such arguments are often problematised by lyrical content. For, while the *music* of both rap and country might employ instrumental styles traceable to non-American sources, the *lyrics* found in these genres and *the ways they are voiced* are incontestably rooted in the USA and (perhaps less noticeably) Canada.²

The world as evoked in rap music tends to resemble that suggested by Tagg, namely the USA and no further. Occasional mentions are made in lyrics and “shout outs” to token global destinations such as London, Paris or Tokyo but it is

generally cities, towns and neighbourhoods within the USA that are invoked. The oft-repeated history of rap describes an emergence in New York, subsequent developments in Los Angeles and a corresponding gradual spread throughout the urban centres of the USA. Rap is generally considered a music of the cities now and is not associated with one city as country is with Nashville. However, New York has often had the edge in the territorial competitiveness that makes up a lot of rap's verbal output. This is largely down to the fact that the main players in the founding myths of rap are associated with New York: Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc; Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. A lot of the early milestone acts in rap history are also of New York heritage such as Run DMC, LL Cool J, Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions.

As a reflection of this, rap music, from its very inception, has produced a large number of hymns to the city that nurtured it. Particular neighbourhoods (or "hoods") are "represented" in song by rap artists such as Grandmaster Flash ('New York New York'), Nas ('New York State of Mind'), LL Cool J ('Straight From Queens'), Boogie Down Productions ('South Bronx') and Jay-Z ('Brooklyn's Finest'). Examples abound from other geographical centres too, from NWA's 'Straight Outta Compton' through Ice Cube's 'How to Survive in South Central' to 2-Pac's 'California Love'. Adam Krims provides a good overview of the emergence of different geographical centres in rap music as well as explaining ways in which artists such as the Goodie MoB signify "Southernness" in their music. However, as Krims points out, remoteness from the traditional centres of New York and Los Angeles does not constitute a remove from the urban. The Goodie MoB consistently emphasise their ghetto roots, serving as a reminder that the South experiences the same inner city problems as the Northeast and West.³

Where no specific place names are cited in rap tracks, references to inner city areas are generally made through signifiers such as "the street(s)", "the projects" or "the ghetto". Some examples used in song titles are: Wu-Tang Clan's 'The Projects' and 'Little Ghetto Boys'; Boogie Down Productions' 'Ghetto Music'; Ice Cube's 'Once Upon A Time In The Projects' and 'Ghetto Vet'; Talib Kweli's 'Ghetto Afterlife'; and Jay-Z's 'Streets Is Watching' and 'So Ghetto'.

Jay-Z is a New York-born rapper who has achieved major commercial success with a body of work that is not only geocentric but frequently

“ghettocentric”. ‘Hard Knock Life’, a number one hit in the UK, provided a vivid depiction of ghetto life that was belied somewhat by the accompanying samples from *Annie*. Depicting as it does the daily goings on in the inner city boroughs of New York and the interrelated activities of criminals and rappers, the song traces themes familiar to fans of Jay-Z’s previous and subsequent work. Slightly over fifty percent of the songs from the rapper’s first five albums specifically name one or more city or neighbourhood. The most common references are to the city of New York, the borough of Brooklyn and the neighbourhood of Bedford Stuyvesant/Marcy. On his sixth and seventh studio albums, *The Blueprint* (2001) and *Best Of Both Worlds* (a collaboration with R Kelly released in 2002), both specific place and general city references drop significantly, suggesting the interest or need in representing the hood has been replaced by other concerns.

The world of country music is similarly geocentric though there can be found a series of engagements with both city and rural life within country texts, belying the assumption that it is a music rooted only in the (southern US) hills, valleys and plains. As with rap, there is a tendency in country to treat the world as though it begins and ends at the national boundaries, although there is also a significant body of work that seeks romance south of the border. Mexico acts as both a place of refuge and an invitation to recklessness in country songs (a tradition that has also been fed by Western films), where characters can escape and become somehow invisible, impervious to the laws that bind them further north. This is a tendency found predominantly in the work of songwriters who live (or have lived) near the border, especially Texans such as Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, Terry Allen, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Steve Earle.

Earle, a Texan singer and songwriter working mainly in Nashville, has produced a large body of work relating to the effects of place and community on individuals. Roughly thirty percent of his work is comprised of love songs which follow the first-to-second-person address common to much popular music. There is a small percentage of what could be termed “historical songs”, dealing with straightforward accounts or fictive recreations of specific past events from the North American continent, and a more or less equal number of songs addressing causes for which Earle is an active campaigner such as anti-landmine and anti-death penalty organisations. The remaining bulk of his work is geocentric, making reference to specific sites within North America or to anonymous rural locations,

towns or cities. Over a third of the songs from Earle's first eight studio albums specifically name one or more town or city; in many more the words "road", "highway", "river", "desert", "town" and "city" reoccur frequently. In Earle's ninth album, 2000's *Transcendental Blues*, no reference to a North American town or city is made – in fact, the only named place on the album is Galway, a town Earle has lived in. However, over half of the songs contain phrases such as "this highway", "out on the highway", "that highway sound", "some dark deserted highway", "this town", "another town", "those city lights" and "back in the hills" and there is the same implicit relationship between geography, community and lived experience that permeates the core of his earlier work.

Earle is not alone in these concerns. Geocentricism is common in much, though certainly not all, country music. To analyse the extent of local geography's importance in the genre would probably entail the construction of a genre system and an accompanying "poetics of country" such as that devised by Adam Krims for rap. Such a study, though useful, cannot be attempted in the space allowed here. However, to briefly expand on the points made above regarding Steve Earle's work, I have found that similar tendencies are particularly common in certain regions (notably Texas) and in certain types of country song (especially story songs, a tradition Texan songwriters seem particularly fond of renewing). Similar statistics to those presented for Earle can also be found by examining the work of Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, the Flatlanders and Terry Allen. An interesting exception is Willie Nelson who, though recording a number of geocentric songs in his long career, has not made a feature of Texas in his music. This may well be due to his background as a professional songwriter for other country artists who required more "general" material to work with.

As the highway references in Earle's work might suggest, his interest in place and its effects on individuals are based less around the idea of the static, nurturing community than on the desire of individuals who feel trapped to escape their surroundings and make new starts elsewhere. Movement and the quest for opportunities denied the small town or rural dweller are common themes. A typical example can be found in the song 'Someday' from Earle's debut album *Guitar Town*. The opening two verses set a small-town scene:

There ain't a lot that you can do in this town
You drive down to the lake and then you turn back around
You go to school and you learn to read and write
So you can walk into the county bank and sign away your life

I work at the fillin' station on the interstate
Pumpin' gasoline and countin' out of state plates
They ask me how far into Memphis son, and where's the nearest beer
And they don't even know that there's a town around here ⁴

The narrator feels caught between a life on the margins of America and the knowledge of the tantalising proximity of the city and all it promises. Bitter both at the stilted possibilities an education brings in remote areas and at the passers through who possess the freedom to move on and to whom he is as invisible as his hometown, he dreams of escape:

Someday I'm finally gonna let go
'Cause I know there's a better way
And I wanna know what's over that rainbow
I'm gonna get out of here someday

Songs like 'Someday', 'Good Ol' Boy' and 'Hillbilly Highway' invited comparisons, upon the release of *Guitar Town*, with John Cougar Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen. Both were well-known writers of lyric-orientated American music who had also released albums of small-town vignettes. Springsteen's *Nebraska*, Mellencamp's *Scarecrow* and Earle's album all came in similar black and white album covers and all contained songs about individuals trapped within a system that either left them impotent or drove them towards action, be it crime or music-making. While Earle acknowledged the comparisons, he pointed out in interviews that the three writers were drawing on and aiming for quite distinct geographic areas:

The Midwest is real AOR [album orientated rock]-orientated. That's the big radio format there, and that's what Cougar appeals to. And Springsteen built his base from the Northeast, because they're very Top 40-radio-orientated in the Northeast. He's also got a huge influence of beach music in his music. I'm from the Southwest, and I live in the Southeast. So that's where I'm coming from. The similarity's there, and I understand the comparisons. But I think they're irrelevant.⁵

Here Earle is clearly aligning himself with the musical world of the southern States, differentiating himself from his songwriting peers as much by geography as musical style. In a similar vein the Missouri-based rapper Nelly equates the

area he represents with a different attitude and sound to that found in other, more established rap environments:

You're dealing with straight reality. So [rappers are] definitely representing where they're from, because that's what they know. While the east coast is harder core hip-hop, the south is the bounce and the west is the funk - with us it's the swing. [...] We're the only mid-west state to have ever had slaves, so we're kinda borderline south. We also like to throw the St Louis blues into our music.⁶

There is the same awareness of geographical difference here as in the Earle quotation. Yet, though Nelly was able to establish himself to a large enough extent locally for his initial records and live appearances to succeed, he found it necessary to approach the New York-based rapper Ma\$e to organise wider distribution. A subsequent deal with Universal helped Nelly's debut album *Country Grammar* to become a massive global success, a reminder that the reliance on marketing and distribution necessary for commercial success leads many "non-centre" artists to the centre. The same reasoning can be found in Steve Earle's defection from the Southwest to the Southeast.

The South-eastern town to which Earle refers is of course Nashville, the long-established centre of country music production and a place which nurtures the dreams of many aspiring musicians and performers while allowing only a proportion of them to come true. Nashville is the "guitar town" referred to in the title song of Earle's album. In it he paints a picture of a more fortunate small-town dweller who, unlike the frustrated narrator of 'Someday', succeeds in escaping his environment. He realises his dream of becoming a musician in Nashville and returns to Texas temporarily to show those who had doubted him what he has achieved:

Nothin' ever happened 'round my hometown
And I ain't the kind to just hang around
But I heard someone callin' my name one day
And I followed that voice down the lost highway
Everybody told me you can't get far
On thirty-seven dollars and a Jap guitar
Now I'm smokin' into Texas with the hammer down
And a rockin' little combo from the Guitar Town⁷

A similar tale is often used in rap lyrics, where the rapper with ambitions beyond the ghetto looks to music and rapping as a means to escape. This escape route is

often cited as the most viable alternative to a life of crime, as in Ice-T's 'Rhyme Pays' with its observation that 'rappin' gets a lot of kids out of the streets' and Nas's 'Represent' which makes analogies between 'the rap game' and 'the crack game'.⁸ In much of Jay-Z's work the choice between selling drugs and making music is reiterated. Those who do make it in the music business are wont to boast of their success and often make symbolic lyrical returns to the hoods they represent. The opening tracks to Jay-Z's second album follow this pattern as the rapper taunts those who doubted him. Like Earle's narrator in 'Guitar Town', he is back to prove the naysayers wrong. As a further challenge to the life of crime he might otherwise have entered, Jay-Z vows to commemorate fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G. by claiming his recently-murdered friend's position as Brooklyn representative:

Don't worry about Brooklyn I continue the flame
 Therefore a world with amnesia won't forget your name
 You held it down long enough, let me take those reigns
 And just like your spirit the commission remains
 Niggaz can cross the t's and, dot the i's
 Now that I got too popular to cop them pies
 I'm takin' this rap shit serious, to my demise
 Jay's shit's like cake mix, watch me rise⁹

The sense of oneness with the city (emphasised in Jay-Z's track by the use of Glen Frey's 'You Belong To The City' as a chorus) is something that is prevalent in rap, further strengthening its image as an essentially urban music. In country music the relationship tends to be more problematic, with the city functioning as both a necessary element in establishing country artists and a potential loss of roots. Indeed country music often views the city as a corrupting presence upon an either imagined or actually experienced simplicity of goodness related to the country. In Merle Haggard's 'Big City' (1982) it is depicted as a place of 'dirty old sidewalks', 'too much work and never enough play' and 'so-called Social Security'. Haggard's narrator longs to 'walk off [his] steady job' and to be 'set [...] free/somewhere in the middle of Montana'. In Guy Clark's 'L.A. Freeway' (1975) the singer bids 'adios to all this concrete/gonna get me some dirt road back street'. His only obstacle is the menacing freeway of the title, which he fears might get him 'killed or caught'. Billy Joe Shaver voices a similar sense of imprisonment to Clark and Haggard in 'L.A. Turnaround' (1975). Longing to 'go

where that wind blows/with a southern drawl’ he begs the city to ‘turn loose my soul’.¹⁰

In Steve Earle’s ‘Hillbilly Highway’, the city is seen by different generations of a family as both destination and point of escape. The opening verse and chorus relate a migration similar to that undertaken by many rural families in the postwar period:

My granddaddy was a miner, but he finally saw the light
He didn't have much, just a beat-up truck and a dream about a better life
Grandmama cried when she waved goodbye, you never heard such a lonesome sound
Pretty soon the dirt road turned into blacktop, Detroit City bound

Down that hillbilly highway
On that hillbilly highway
That ol’ hillbilly highway
Goes on and on¹¹

In the second verse it becomes clear that, though they have left home and family behind (presumably what ‘Grandmama’ was crying about), it is for the family’s future that they have moved to the city. In a classic generational twist, however, their son leaves Detroit to head back south, albeit for another city:

Now he worked and he saved his money so that one day he might send
My old man off to college, to use his brains and not his hands
Grandmama cried when he said goodbye, you never heard such a lonesome sound
But daddy had himself a good job in Houston, one more rollin' down

That ol’ hillbilly highway
[etc.]

Like his father before him, the narrator does not stay put either but leaves as soon as he is able, presumably, as in ‘Guitar Town’, to find work as a musician:

Now Granddaddy rolled over in his grave the day that I quit school
I just sat around the house playin' my guitar, Daddy said I was a fool
My mama cried when I said goodbye, you never heard such a lonesome sound
Now I'm standin' on this highway and if you're goin' my way you know where I'm bound

Like the highway that ‘goes on and on’, each generation removes itself from the previous one, engendering a cycle that is marked by the regularity of matriarchal wailing. But for all the migrations and peregrinations the song retains, in Earle’s vocalisation, a strong sense of place. His vowels are heavily Southernised and his accent picks out the southernisms “granddaddy”, “Grandmama”, “lonesome” and

“ol””. The combination of linguistic and sonic signifiers roots the song firmly within the country music tradition. For example, “ol(d)” is a significant and signifying word in country music. Most commonly meaning “familiar” or “reliable”, it can also, of course, possess its literal qualities of age and suggested decrepitude. The ‘dirty old sidewalks’ of Haggard’s ‘Big City’ are both familiar *and* decrepit.

Earle’s constant repetition of the phrase ‘Hillbilly Highway’ is a very conscious attempt to reclaim the word “hillbilly” from its negative denotation, as is clear from numerous interviews with the singer. Although the hillbilly highway is initially presented in the song as a means of *escape from* the country it is a two-way road and provides the crucial link back to the family’s roots. The narrator’s father chooses to make this return journey and there is a sense that the older and younger generations are using the city as a temporary means of opportunity. Detroit is an appropriate choice here as it represents a history of industrial and musical development that suitably serves the grandfather’s and narrator’s needs.

Earle has settled on the word “hillbilly”, then, as a means of presenting a pride in rural roots and in singing in heavily accented southern dialect. Rather than ignoring the term, he would rather use it to exhaustion in a manner he compares to Lenny Bruce’s use of the word “nigger”.¹² This is an interesting comparison in the context of this dissertation as it is rap music that has, more than any other factor, forever altered the connotations of that word. “Nigger” has joined that class of terms that have been granted a powerful positivity *provided they are used by those who belong to the groups the terms represent* (an important distinction from Bruce’s attempts to liberate taboo words). The majority of black rap tracks utilise the word which, while retaining its historical pronunciation /vɪlɪ↔/ now changes its spelling to “nigga”. This change not only moves the visual word closer to its spoken sound but modernises it for contemporary discourse. This is even more noticeable in the spelling of the plural form “niggaz”, representing as it does the sound /vɪlɪ↔z/, most famously used by the group NWA (Niggaz With Attitude).

While the use of “nigga” by rap artists may well have contributed to a sense of empowerment, the derogatory history entailed in the older “nigger” is far from being dissipated. Rap artist Mos Def shows a strong awareness of this with his 1999 album *Black On Both Sides*. Aware that there are quite distinct

perceptions at work from those who are black to those who are not, he portrays blackness as both source of pride and marker of difference, both quality and ongoing inequality. Nowhere is this more evident than in his track ‘Mr. Nigga’, which relates the experiences of inequality encountered by seemingly empowered (i.e. successful) black public figures such as rap stars:

He under thirty years old but already he's a pro
 Designer trousers slung low 'cause his pockets stay swoll'
 Could afford to get up and be anywhere he go
 VIP at the club, backstage at the show
 [...]
 One problem; even with the O's on his check
 The po-po stop him and show no respect
 "Is there a problem officer?" Damn straight, it's called race
 That motivate the jake to give chase
 Say they want you successful, but that ain't the case
 You livin' large, your skin is dark they flash a light in your face¹³

The track continues with further examples of double standards, including a contrast in the way O.J. Simpson and Woody Allen were treated following highly publicised court cases. Like Steve Earle in ‘Hillbilly Highway’, Mos Def attempts to bring a positive denotation to a previously derogative word through choral repetition. However, he also recognises the negative burden of connotation bound up in that word and recognises that, for all the flaunting of racial pride by “niggaz”, the implications of blackness in a racist society still provide a heavy burden.

The final point I wish to make about the terms “hillbilly” and “nigger” is the relationship they hold to geographical locations. While this is perhaps more obvious in the former term, denoting as it does a person from the remoter rural areas of the American South, it is also worth noting the heavy use of the latter term within those same southern (ex-slave) States. The appropriation by predominantly city-based black rap artists of the rural-connoting “nigger” shows an urbanisation/modernisation of the term. Attempts like Earle’s to hijack the prejudices held by urbanites towards rural dwellers, framed as they are by song texts relayed via modern technology, highlight a dialectic often found in country music, that between the “traditional” sounds of the rural regions and the “modern” sounds of the urban recording studio.¹⁴ While such definitions are transparent and clearly problematised by, for example, rural electric blues guitarists or urban folk

revivalists, pop and rock have long been considered, to borrow Charlie Gillett's phrase, sounds of the city.¹⁵ Country, by contrast, has been considered, at least since the surprised realisation by entrepreneurs such as Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer that "hillbilly" music might be a profitable market to town and country folk alike, to be of the "undeveloped" hills, mountains and valleys. For these men, as for subsequent scouts, promoters and field recorders, rural music was something to be collected from the source, to be brought, as the recent concert featuring the *O Brother Where Art Thou* musicians would have it, 'down from the mountains' (a phrase which contrasts nicely with "up from the streets").¹⁶ The problem increasingly became that those regions were not undeveloped and there were not authentic musicians waiting around to be discovered and collected. As Robert Shelton writes of the mid-twentieth century folk music revivalists

We began to take off on rambles out of the Northern cities to meet the white folk music world on its home ground. We tried the Old Time Fiddler's Convention in Virginia, but were discouraged, in our purist zeal, by the large proportion of electrified country and rock'n'roll being played there. We were looking for purer country air.¹⁷

Shelton illustrates here how the expectations harboured by those travelling from the city to the country were as prone to disappointment as those of rural people making the opposite migration. Later he relates that greater satisfaction was found in witnessing performances of bluegrass music but it is worth noting, as Mark Fenster does in his survey of the "bluegrass industry", how that particular strand of country music was (and has mostly remained) an artificially restricted, and not a latently pure genre, relying on a variety of institutionalised practices to retain its authenticity.¹⁸

The city, then, has a strong presence in country music, whether as an obvious *absence* (as in bluegrass), as something to be aspired to or escaped from in country lyrics, or as the place that makes the widespread distribution of country music possible. It is also, despite the cosmopolitanism it promises, a place of segregation and it is worth considering this aspect of the city as a contributing factor of the gulf between different musical styles and their attendant scenes. Barry Shank remarks in his study of the music scene in Austin, Texas that it is as unusual for rappers from the east side of that city to venture into the predominantly white neighbourhoods of the west side as it is for the white country

or rock performers to make the opposite journey. The “dissonant identities” that Shank writes about are brought about by a mixture of musical styles such as country, progressive rock and punk rock and not by the intermingling of different ethnicities. Though the possibilities of such intermingling are suggested by the presence in Texas of Tex-Mex music, Shank chooses not to follow up that particular genre and focuses instead on the legacy of “white music”. That he can do so and paint a coherent portrait of a city’s music scene suggests how segregated such scenes can be.

What is true of Austin is just as true of numerous other cities around the globe, which is to say that segregation is not something inherent to the Southern States of America. This is a point worth making because of country music’s association with the South and its history of slavery and racism. The system of slavery enforced a closeness between black and white that non-slave states (whether in the USA or elsewhere) would not abide. Many anti-slavery campaigners were fiercely segregationist, believing no good could ever come from the intermingling of races. While the Reconstruction period in the American South could hardly be said to have produced a successfully integrated population, it did, in the short period before industrialisation, produce a racially mixed rural working class. It is from this base that significant elements of black and white musical styles of the twentieth century sprang.

Richard Peterson makes the point that Jim Crow racism had an effect on the ensuing segregation of black and white music distribution, whereby early recordings were issued in race-specific series. Often the same song would be cut by several artists, a practice that would continue well into the era of rock ‘n’ roll. Should they be otherwise unable to establish the ethnicity of the performer - a likely occurrence – purchasers could deduce the answer from the catalogue number. This being the case it is strange, as Peterson notes, to see a subsequent dialectic surrounding ethnicity and originality in which ‘[white] innovators are said, with surprise, to have been inspired by African American performers. It would be more accurate to say that both races had contributed to and drawn from a common rural working-class heritage’.¹⁹ Tony Russell comes to a similar conclusion based on an examination of early recording catalogues: ‘the traditional music of the countryman was a repertoire shared by black and white; a common stock. [...A]lmost every opportunity of building his repertoire came to the rural

musician through omni-racial media.’²⁰ These included carnivals, medicine shows and, later, broadcasts and records.

Russell’s *Blacks, Whites and Blues* provides a comprehensive account of the influence of white and black musicians on each other that led to the emergence of blues and country music, genres which only became clearly established a few decades into the twentieth century. Nick Tosches has performed a similar, if rather sensationalist, excavation of what he calls the ‘cultural seepage [...of] a century of windings and flowings’ that contribute to the make-up of country music.²¹ What both writers show is that, through the century of post-Civil War segregation, rural American music provided a common denominator between black and white worlds missing in almost all other aspects of life. Ironically, as those other aspects slowly became integrated through (black and white) migration to the cities and to the North, and, as African Americans fought for and gradually gained rights previously denied them, so the music that had once been a shared experience started to segment and re-identify itself. Although music by black and white musicians had started to be issued in common series by the 1930s, radio stations like the black-owned WDIA in Memphis continued to encourage musical segregation, as did the new *Billboard* charts of 1948. Syd Nathan’s King Records, founded in 1943, specialised in selling black and white versions of songs to separate audiences, such as ‘Bloodshot Eyes’ by Hank Penny (country) and Wynonie Harris (rhythm and blues) or ‘Finger Poppin’ Time’ by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters (rhythm and blues) and the Stanley Brothers (bluegrass).²²

This is not to suggest that the city could not be a melting pot for musical styles as the country had been. Nelson George and Russell Potter have both stressed the non-African American contributions to the early rap music scene in New York, be they from Latino breakdancers, Jewish businessmen or white rock bands.²³ George Lipsitz has written on the miscegenation of musical styles that has taken place in Los Angeles, producing groups such as Los Lobos. For Lipsitz the integration of ethnic styles is a postmodern phenomenon that allows marginalised groups to build historical blocs to preserve their music while also breaking down barriers through a refusal of separatism:

When similar record collections enable [...] a white musician influenced by black rhythm and blues to join a Chicano rock band on the basis of a mutual affinity for country and

western singers Hank Williams and George Jones, we have gone a long way toward a world in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’.²⁴

Yet the common stock that Russell refers to has disappeared with the growth of the individual songwriter and versions of communally recognised songs have been replaced by cover versions. At the same time the eclecticism of early blues and country performers has been replaced by a purism based on genre expectation. Even in the era of postmodernism it has become the exception rather than the rule to witness something like the Gourds’ country version of Snoop Doggy Dogg’s ‘Gin and Juice’, such is the seemingly rigid segmentation of country and rap.²⁵ Yet it may be just that the “cultural seepage” of various music types is at work in other, more subtle ways.

Nicholas Dawidoff, making a connection between music and segregation, writes that ‘country music [...] enabled poor Southern white people to hear strains of the black workingman’s music while keeping their distance from poor working-class blacks’.²⁶ Dawidoff does rather fall into the trap of aligning segregationist leanings with only one (and possibly an incorrectly observed) group of people. As mentioned previously, there is no particular reason why such an observation should be restricted to ‘poor Southern white people’. There was no doubt a similar process at work in the minstrel turns which, as part and parcel of the early country music performers’ repertoire, were enjoyed by both national and international audiences of varying classes, many with potentially the same agenda of segregation. This reservation against Davidoff’s point aside, it is possible to argue that there is a reflection of the situation he describes in black listeners’ enjoyment of rap. The musical backings to rap tracks, the songs or musical motifs cut up into breakbeats, have, from the outset, as often been from white musicians as from black. As Russell A. Potter writes, early hip-hop DJs such as Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa took pleasure in cutting up music by the Rolling Stones, Simon & Garfunkel and Thin Lizzy and in ‘fooling the crowd, getting them to dance to music they would rarely play on their own’.²⁷ Later, the hard chords of a heavy-metal guitar, such as those used by Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Public Enemy and Ice-T, allowed these listeners to hear (and enjoy) strains of the “white” rock canon while maintaining a distance from an overt appreciation of it.

A point could be made here about the accuracy of labelling rock and heavy metal “white music”. This is a point addressed explicitly in Mos Def’s ‘Rock N Roll’, a track that reminds his listeners of the debt owed by white rock artists to black innovators. Refuting claims made by others that rap is ‘heavy metal for black people’ he roots the discord and chords of rock in plantation slaves and their descendants:

Been here forever!
 They just ain't let you know
 [...]
 I said, Elvis Presley ain't got no soul
 Chuck Berry is rock and roll
 You may dig on the Rolling Stones
 But they ain't come up with that style on they own²⁸

Similarly there is more rock and roll for Mos Def in Jimi Hendrix than in Korn and a somehow “truer” blend of rap and metal in Fishbone than in Limp Bizkit. To further illustrate his point he concludes the track (which is not strictly speaking a rap, being predominantly chanted) with loud electric guitar played in punk style. Similar tactics have been employed by Ice-T by maintaining a recording and performing career with his thrash metal group Body Count alongside his own, more “traditional”, rap projects.

Such reclamation of the importance of black input into rock music, while regarded by some as necessary, runs the danger of maintaining claims on ethnic absolutism such as those exposed by Tagg. In doing so it ignores the possibilities of enjoyment in popular music based on identification with sound rather than race. It is frequently argued that the importance of rap music, and of hip-hop culture in general, lies in a subcultural recontextualisation of racially-defined elements (such as those that are seen to construe “black music” and “white music”) in an attempt to subvert the hegemony of the dominant canon.²⁹ While this may be one of the crucial legacies of rap as a cultural form, it is also necessary to observe the extent to which music is made for pleasure. The DJs performing the archival research that leads to the sampled riff or beat and the audience who respond to the tracks produced by the DJ are both tapping into a need for enjoyable sounds. As Pharrell Williams of the rap group N.E.R.D. asks, ‘why don’t my friends from the hood admit they love [Nirvana’s] “Smells Like Teen Spirit”?’³⁰

Russell Potter makes the point that such examples of multicultural interaction problematise analyses of rap music based on racial particularism. Citing Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic as an example of how the production and reception of rap can be seen as a pluralistic, *global* phenomenon, Potter describes the attempt to remove rap from the straightjacket of the particular (i.e., its association with African-American experience) as a 'tightrope [...] strung [...] between historical suffering and utopian aspirations'. He also warns that 'as [rap] gains audiences around the world, there is always the danger that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories are obscured, and its message replaced with others'.³¹

This is a point borne out by many others who have written on the impact of rap in Britain and who claim that the sheer unfamiliarity of the landscapes evoked in rap tracks have led certain (particularly white) listeners to glamorise or exoticise the locations depicted so graphically.³² A similar point could be made about the fans of early country songs who were able to bypass the realities of rural poverty experienced in the American South in favour of the glamour of exotic-sounding locations. Tony Russell suggests that the 'undeniable magic' of Jimmie Rodgers songs such as 'Jimmie's Texas Blues', 'Peach Pickin' Time Down in Georgia', 'My Little Old Home Town in New Orleans' and numerous others helped sell them to listeners as far afield as England, India, Australia and Japan.³³

This point about the changing nature of reception as it becomes global is one I will return to in Chapter Three. Yet, however far rap or country music travel and however much they succeed or fail in crossing ethnic or cultural barriers, they can seldom relieve themselves from an association with place. The British group Earthling highlight this in the track '1st Transmission' when, even as they engage with the plural aspects of the Black Atlantic, they celebrate the particularism of local experience:

London is my city
 Jamaica's my country
 Africa's my history
 It ain't no mystery
 How I came to be earthling free
 Sitting in Ilford watching TV³⁴

Although the bulk of ‘1st Transmission’ deals with the myriad possibilities of cultural identification in a postmodern world, the sense of locality remains palpable, from the “trip-hop” backing (a strong signifier of Britishness in hip-hop culture) to the English-accented vocals. As Potter observes, ‘even as it remains a global music, [rap] is firmly rooted in the local and temporal; it is music about “where I’m from”’.³⁵ The same, of course, could equally well be said for country.

With this in mind, I would like to close this chapter by looking at two examples of how this sense of place is imprinted in lyrics and their delivery. The examples I have chosen are ‘Where I’m From’ by rapper Jay-Z and ‘Where I Come From’ by country singer Alan Jackson. The Jay-Z track is from his 1997 album *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* and is one of many on that album to make explicit reference to the neighbourhood the rapper grew up in. The chorus features the following repeated refrain:

Cough up a lung
Where I’m from, Marcy son
Ain’t nothin’ nice
Mentally been many places
But I’m Brooklyn’s own³⁶

This refrain is interspersed with verses which detail some of the things the narrator associates with this neighbourhood such as:

I’m from where the church is the flakiest
And niggers is praying to God so long they atheist
Where you can’t put your vest away and say you’ll wear it tomorrow
Cause the day after we’ll be saying, ‘Damn I was just with him yesterday’
I’m a block away from hell
[...]
Where we call the cops the A-Team cause they hop out of vans and spray things
And life expectancy so low we making out wills at eighteen

Throughout the track runs the notion of a place deserted by God and government and ruled instead by ‘thugs’ and ‘drug lords’. The rap is delivered at a medium pace that quickens at certain crucial points (such as the longer lines reproduced above) and evokes the claustrophobic enclosure of the inner city. The narrator, it seems, has managed to escape the enclosure, capitalising on a desire expressed in the first verse ‘where the plans was to get funds and skate off the set’, and is now ‘just [...] remind[ing]’ his listeners of his roots.

In the Jackson track, the place the narrator is from is never mentioned, though it is obviously somewhere rural. Each verse names a different US city or state, detailing the narrators travels as a truck driver. As in ‘Where I’m From’, there is a contrast between travel and attachment to one’s place of origin, evoked in the chorus through association rather than name:

Cause where I come from it’s cornbread and chicken
Where I come from a lotta front porch sittin’
Where I come from tryin’ to make a livin’
And workin’ hard to get to Heaven
Where I come from³⁷

If there is any escape desired by the narrator of this song it is only to Heaven. Though the narrator is guilty of breaking the law (as detailed in a verse relating a speeding incident) lawlessness is something associated with the industrial North (the incident takes place in New Jersey) while the South is evoked as a place of home cooking, fidelity and religious stability.

Both tracks effectively showcase the ways landscapes are evoked through vocalisation. The number of words delivered per verse and per minute in rap is so great that a fast delivery is required to fit an average song length (though average song length in rap tends to be greater than other forms of popular music, including country). The effect is such that rap vocals leave little or no space for the listener to “fill in” except in the chorus parts where the track’s “hook” provides both relief from the relentless verbal attack of the verses and pleasure in its melodic counterpart.. In the same way that a journey through an unknown city can blur into a series of sights, signs and repeating streets that pass the traveller too quickly to be registered more than fleetingly on first viewing, so the barrage of references and rhymes in the rapped vocal require intense concentration or repeated exposure to start to become familiar. After familiarisation it is possible for listeners to return to favourite tracks to take pleasure in the verbal feats of the rapper much as one might return to a favourite city landmark to marvel at the genius of its engineering.

By contrast the vocal delivery in country, dealing as it does with far fewer words, can lend itself, where necessary, to a more sedate pace. There is a tendency to linger on particular words and to suggest, through vocal inflection, that simple words might possess hidden depths of meaning. Like a leisurely drive

through unfamiliar countryside the experience of listening to a new country song is a gentler, though no less intense, experience, than negotiating the urban maze. Similarly, after familiarisation with the song, it is quite possible for a listener to return to take pleasure in what one first found interesting and to hope to deepen that experience through further exposure. As the countryside changes with the weather so the country song may change with the emotional or seasonal experiences the listener brings to it.

In addition to illuminating the points made above, the Jay-Z and Jackson tracks both succeed in presenting themselves as autobiographical testaments. This is done explicitly in the Jay-Z track through repeated mentions of Marcy and Brooklyn, though we are still unable to deduce from listening to the track how relevant it is to Jay-Z's actual experience. There is nothing so explicit in the Jackson track to signify autobiography, yet there remains an implicit suggestion that Jackson *is* singing about himself, in the chorus if not the verses. The reasons for this stem from both the association in popular song between the first person address and star persona and from the importance placed on memory and lived experience in rap and country music. It is with these issues that the next chapter deals.

Notes

¹ Philip Tagg, 'Open Letter: "Black Music", "Afro-American Music" and "European Music"', *Popular Music* 8 (1989), pp. 285-295.

² Tagg, p. 287.

³ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 123-125.

⁴ Steve Earle, 'Someday', Track 6 of *Guitar Town* [Expanded Edition] (MCA Nashville 088 170 265-2, 2002). DCD Track 1 [excerpt].

⁵ Alanna Nash, *Behind Closed Doors: Talking with the Legends of Country Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 145.

⁶ Quoted in *Hip-Hop Connection* #162, August 2002, p. 48.

⁷ Steve Earle, 'Guitar Town', Track 1 of *Guitar Town*. DCD Track 2 [excerpt].

⁸ Ice-T, 'Rhyme Pays', Track 1 on *Rhyme Pays* (Sire/Warner Bros. 7599-25602-2, 1987); Nas, 'Represent', Track 9 on *Illmatic* (Columbia 478595 2, 1994).

⁹ Jay-Z, 'The City Is Mine', Track 2 of *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* (Roc-A-Fella Records 74321 55989 2, 1997). DCD Track 3 [excerpt].

¹⁰ Merle Haggard, 'Big City', Track 1 on *Big City* (Epic/Legacy 495246 2, 1999) [originally released on Epic, 1981]; Guy Clark, 'L.A. Freeway', Track 2 on *Old No. 1* (LP) (Edsel ED 285, 1988) [originally released on RCA, 1975]; Billy Joe Shaver, 'L.A. Turnaround', Track 3 on *Old Five and Dimers Like Me* (Koch KOC-CD-7938, 1996) [originally released on Monument KZ 32293, 1973]. The first verse and chorus of 'Big City' is DCD Track 16.

¹¹ Steve Earle, 'Hillbilly Highway', Track 3 on *Guitar Town*. DCD Track 4.

¹² Nash, p. 149.

¹³ Mos Def, 'Mr. Nigga', Track 15 on *Black on Both Sides* (Rawkus 485.1159.20, 1999). DCD Track 5.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note how the same man responsible for declining to release Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road* due to its high rock content, Jimmy Bowen, apparently had no such qualms about the same elements in Brook's music. It is indicative of how, in a short space of time, the culture industry in Nashville (specifically the record companies and country radio and television) had considerably shifted its outlook.

¹⁵ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, rev. edn (London: Souvenir Press, 1983).

¹⁶ *Down from the Mountain*, dir. by Nick Doob, Chris Hegedus and D A Pennebaker (2000).

¹⁷ Robert Shelton, 'Something Happened in America' in *The Electric Muse: The Story of Folk into Rock* by Dave Laing and others (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 26.

¹⁸ Mark Fenster, 'Commercial (and/or?) Folk: The Bluegrass Industry and Bluegrass Traditions', in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars and Honky-Tonk Bars* ed. by Cecilia Tichi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 74-97.

¹⁹ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 235 (note 2).

²⁰ Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites and Blues*, rev. edn in *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre* by Paul Oliver and others (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 163, 165.

²¹ Nick Tosches, *Country: Living Legends and Dying Metaphors in America's Biggest Music*, 2nd edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p. 172. See particularly the 'Cowboys and Niggers' chapter (pp. 162-217).

²² James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll 1947-1977* (New York: Fireside, 1999), pp. 32, 37; David Sanjek, 'Blue Moon of Kentucky Rising Over the Mystery Train: The Complex Construction of Country Music' in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars and Honky-Tonk Bars* ed. by Cecilia Tichi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 33.

²³ Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), pp. 56-75; Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 142-146.

²⁴ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 151.

²⁵ The Gourds, 'Gin and Juice', Track 1 on *Shinebox* [expanded edn] (Glitterhouse/Munich GRCD 539, 2001). Snoop Doggy Dogg's original is Track 3 on *Doggystyle* (Death Row/Interscope IND 92279, 1993).

²⁶ Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 10.

²⁷ Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 40.

²⁸ Mos Def, 'Rock N Roll', *Black on Both Sides* (Rawkus 485.1159.20, 1999). DCD Track 6.

²⁹ See especially Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1990); Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁰ *Rolling Stone*, Issue 866, April 12 2001, p. 96.

³¹ Potter, p. 146.

³² Ben Thompson, *Seven Years of Plenty: A Handbook of Irrefutable Pop Greatness 1991-1998* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), pp. 43-45; Jeremy J. Beadle, *Will Pop Eat Itself?: Pop Music in the Soundbite Era* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), pp. 76-91.

³³ Russell, p. 191.

³⁴ Earthling, '1st Transmission' [CD Single] (Chrysalis 7243 8 81809 2 4, 1994). DCD Track 7 [excerpt].

³⁵ Potter, p. 146.

³⁶ Jay-Z, 'Where I'm From', Track 13 on *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*. DCD Track 8.

³⁷ Alan Jackson, 'Where I Come From', Track 5 on *When Somebody Loves You* (Grapevine/Arista Nashville 74321 81178 2, 2000). DCD Track 9.

CHAPTER TWO

MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

As I have attempted to show in the previous chapter, the use of voice and lyric in country and rap is an important factor in the process of audience identification. It is not only through evocations of geographic or ethnic “worlds” that this process takes place, but also through “worldviews” that performers invite their audiences to identify with. By examining elements of memory and experience in these musics we can see more clearly the importance of voice and lyric in expressing such concerns. For, while country and rap have strong ties to instrumental music - from the dance tunes of early string bands and the sonic experiments of pioneer hip-hop DJs onwards - both genres have, at vital stages of their development, seen vocals take a leading role.

It is frequently assumed that the progression in technique in country singing has been one from a sort of “rough” or “rustic” style to a “smoother”, more “sanitised” approach. However, as Richard Peterson has pointed out, throughout the modern era of recording and broadcasting there has been an ongoing dialectic between “hard-core” and “soft-shell” styles (described in more detail in Chapter Three) rather than a straightforward progression from one to the other. It is worth briefly outlining the approaches country singers took when moving away from the instrumental era.

In some senses the rustic, or “authentic”, sound that eschewed microphone technique, or at least maintained an illusion of doing so, can be seen as a reaction to the smoother sounds of pop-oriented crooning. “Rustic vocalisation” can be understood to refer to a style of singing that is readily identified with qualities such as simplicity, roughness and lack of sophistication and finish. Its most basic identifiable image is that of a strongly accented, rural dweller who, in singing, enacts a kind of spontaneous performance not far removed from his/her normal speech and, in doing so, unmask the pretensions normally associated with performance. Such style, as practised by Roy Acuff and developed by Hank Williams and later singers, was seen to bring the performer closer to the audience and allowed for the introduction, especially noticeable in

Williams' work, of more personal, seemingly autobiographical material, material rooted at once in both the singer's and the listener's lived experience.

Against such style, however, must be placed that employed by performers such as Ernest Tubb. Barry Shank relates how Tubb was able to move away from the 'high tenor range common to Anglo-Saxon male folksinging' through advances in recording and broadcasting technologies. Tubb and many of his successors saw the microphone as an aid to their authenticity work. The intimacy provided by the modern microphone helped popularise lower tones and more relaxed singing techniques as the amount of projection required was significantly lessened. This 'contributed to the authenticity of feeling communicated in [Tubb's] singing' in that his voice 'sounded more "real", more like the voices heard everyday by his fans'. Tubb helped country music develop into what Shank calls a 'genre of sincerity' and it is certainly true that the style he employed, and which numerous subsequent country singers have since emulated, became a staple sound of "authentic" country music.¹ Yet even within this smoother style it has still become the mark of a country singer to let his/her voice "break" at times, to allow the rougher edges to show through at critical moments. In this chapter I will look at the way Merle Haggard and Iris Dement embody respectively the smooth and rustic styles of singing and how the contrast between them helps set up a dialogue that reflects back on aspects of memory and experience in the work of both singers.

What remains constant in both styles of singing is the desire to provide a voice with which the audience can identify. To accompany this a straightforward language is utilised in lyrics that are grounded in everyday experiences. If the song topics are in any way out of the everyday it helps if the illusion of authenticity can be assumed by the singer and made believable for the audience. This is where the importance of memory and experience comes into play in country and where it finds a further correlation with rap. David Toop, writing on how the language of rap has evolved over the last quarter of a century, locates elements of folklore but also notes how, with a move away from call and response vocalising more modern, individualist influences came to abound:

Since the individual rapper did not have to answer to the group, or squeeze personally meaningful and carefully crafted lyrics into unsympathetic, overcrowded texts, personal idiosyncrasies and literary influences could be explored more fully in this new context.

In the ascendant Los Angeles scene, for example, Ice-T claimed that his lyrics were influenced not only by his own early delinquency but by the autobiographical writings of Robert Beck, better known as Iceberg Slim.²

The desires to present art as autobiography or to turn autobiography into art can lead to quite different results. In this chapter I will look at how the personal and autobiographical is linked to public experience and collective memory in the work of Talib Kweli but kept within the self in the work of Eminem. Eminem's lived contradictions include his maintenance of a variety of facades and his simultaneous obsession with "keeping it real".

As the Toop quotation makes clear, the combination of autobiography and persona provides the opportunity for rappers to produce narratives in which they, in the leading role, say and do things they would be unable to do in real life. Ice T, like Jay-Z after him, makes much of the criminal career he might have continued pursuing had he not turned to music. Through his "Iceberg" persona he is able to produce violent and vivid gangster narratives and present them as personal experience, regardless of whether they are or not. Even through the mask of persona, however, many rappers have felt pressure exerted on them to tone down the realism of their work. The track 'Cop Killer', by Ice-T's heavy metal group Body Count, is a famous example of corporate and political pressure being brought to bear on a narrative misheard as a call to arms.³ More recently Eminem has courted controversy through a series of narratives presented as simultaneously autobiographical and fictive. The three personae he uses (Slim Shady, Eminem and his actual name Marshall Mathers) provide a series of masks through which to present his material and a safety net for an artist who has become increasingly aware of the temptation of listeners to conflate person and persona, fiction and truth.

Compared to rap, country provides a simpler, though no less pervasive, conflation of the "I" of narrative with the "I" of the artist. It also tends to attract less controversy, though this is arguably due to factors surrounding the politics of race, youth and moral panics. Certainly, there is no lack of colourful characters in country music and the familiarity of many artists with the insides of penitentiaries might prove surprising to those who associate antisocial behaviour with rap stars. Original role models of rock 'n' roll rebellion such as Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis were of course primarily country singers and the conflict between Saturday

night pleasures and Sunday morning redemption so forcefully embodied in a performer like Lewis is part of an ongoing dialectic crucial to country music.

The public persona of an artist such as Merle Haggard is moulded to fit the special authenticity derived from his lived experience. In writings about him certain elements are almost always alluded to, most notably the poverty he was born into, the time he spent in San Quentin prison, his subsequent redemption through music, and his tempestuous love life. A typical description of him reads, ‘Moody, uncompromising, and unpredictable in his personal life, he wears the scars of life’s battles as badges of survival’.⁴ Haggard himself perpetuates the persona through his songwriting, in which he has covered all the elements mentioned above many times over. This often leads to a tendency towards expressing regret that things were not different, wishing something could happen or hadn’t happened, and re-imag(in)ing both past and present. This is a common trope in country music and Haggard is an illustrative, if for once not solitary, example. “Wish”, “if”, and a whole host of conditional structures abound in the genre, including George Jones’ ‘If Drinking Don’t Kill Me (Her Memory Will)’, Lyle Lovett’s ‘If I Were the Man You Wanted’ and ‘If I Had a Boat’, and Chris Knight’s ‘If I Were You’. Haggard’s contributions include ‘If We Make It Through December’, ‘If I Could Only Fly’, ‘Wishing All These Old Things Were New’, and ‘Are the Good Times Really Over (I Wish A Buck Was Still Silver)’. In the latter song, Haggard mourns the loss he perceives the country as a whole has experienced while also referencing perhaps the single most famous song about personal reminiscence:

I wish a buck was still silver
And it was back when the country was strong
Back before Elvis
And before the Vietnam war came along
Before the Beatles and Yesterday
When a man could still work and still would
Is the best of the free life behind us now
Are the good times really over for good⁵

Haggard is clearly enjoying his wordplay in this song. Is he really talking about the song ‘Yesterday’ or making a time reference? The phonemic similarity and semantic difference between the modal verbs “would” and “could” (and, later, between “would” and “should”) gives meaning to the lyric in a very economical

way while leaving plenty for the vocal to tease out. These words also provide rhymes for “good”, yet that word is suspect and contradictory: it is the accepted part of a phrase implying completion (‘over for good’) but the situation it is describing is, for Haggard and those he speaks for, “bad”. The importance of multiple word meanings is something Haggard seems especially aware of in the third verse, where he illustrates the changing semantics of a changing world:

I wish coke was still cola
And a joint was a bad place to be
And it was back before Nixon
Lied to us all on T.V.

Here, Haggard’s concern with the changing prominence of word meanings, paralleled with the duplicitous words of politicians and the suspect distribution of information by electronic media, seems to reflect a pity he thinks everyone should share. This importantly creates a space where hope can replace despair, where society can, should they be willing, be a force “for good”. The song acknowledges this with a shift from the inquisitive tone of the second verse (‘Are we rolling downhill...?’) to the imperative of the fourth and final verse (‘Stop rolling downhill’) and a final assertion that ‘the best of the free life is still yet to come/And the good times ain’t over for good’. This change in emphasis increases the potential for Haggard to inject subjective opinion into his song, a quality the use of modal verbs facilitates. As Roger Fowler writes, ‘if modal expressions are frequent and highlighted [in texts], subjectivity is enhanced, the illusion of a ‘person’ with a voice and opinions’.⁶

Haggard’s concern in this song with the rise in prominence (or, more accurately, his own awareness) of recreational drug use does not reflect on his lived experience: it is something he is aware of, but not part of. But by the time of ‘Wishing All These Old Things Were New’, such a distance can no longer be maintained:

Watching while some old friends do a line
Holding back the want to in my own addicted mind
Wishin’ it was still the thing even I could do
Wishin’ all these old things were new⁷

Haggard presents the listener with a jaded aspect of lived experience, but still pines for ‘good times like the roaring 20’s and/The roaring 80’s too’ and for ‘the good old days/Before it all fell through’. Haggard’s work, here and elsewhere, manages to interweave personal memory and experience with public experience and collective memory. While the “personal” material often subsumes the possibility of change with regret, the “public” finds change both possible and desirable. In an interview, Haggard put the popularity of his 1982 country number one, ‘Big City’, down to the fact that ‘it just said what people wanted to hear’ and it seems safe to assume he felt the same about ‘Are the Good Times Really Over’.⁸ Where that track bemoaned the negative aspects of changing times, another notable track from the *Big City* album offered the idea of memory as a buffer against the times, as something more permanent than time.

Daniel Cooper writes, in the liner notes to the CD reissue of *Big City*, that ‘memory is a choice one makes while flying fearlessly towards a future of unknowable change’. This rather cryptic observation is an allusion to the closing comments in Merle Haggard’s autobiography, published in 1981, which find the singer sitting on a plane, unable to see what lies ahead of him but clearly able to see ‘a lot of the past’.⁹ The notion of autobiography as a menu of memories from which to pick and choose is emphasised further in ‘My Favorite Memory’, another number one single on the country music charts and a track that occupies a strategic second place on *Big City*, following directly from the title cut. Its chorus, which is placed prior to the single verse and repeated after it, is as follows:

The first time we met is a favorite memory of mine
They say time changes all it pertains to
But your memory is stronger than time

I guess everything does change except what you choose to recall
There’s a million good daydreams to dream on
But baby, you are my favorite memory of all¹⁰

The single verse does not offer many specific examples but it does offer the idea of selective memory at work, a concept expanded in the rap track ‘Memories Live’ by Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek, with which it provides a useful comparison:

‘My Favorite Memory’

Like the night we made love in the hallway

And slept all night long on the floor
Like the winter we spent on Lake Shasta alone
And closer than ever before

‘Memories Live’

Like the faces that are woven in the fabric of my consciousness
From cities where making 21’s a big accomplishment
Like when my people understood they prominence
And my past like visions of the continent
Like the first time I saw KRS live rocking it
Or heard Resurrection by Common Sense¹¹

Kweli’s lyrics manage to interweave personal and collective memory, mixing reminiscence with social observation and as-yet-unfulfilled desire. He evokes the house parties of his youth, awareness of black political slogans of the recent past, prominent black artists such as KRS One and Spike Lee, his entry into the rap world and his desire to visit Africa. Africa is evoked, here and elsewhere in his work, as an eternal essence, root, route and ultimate destination. Kweli seeks to find his place in a tradition that looks both to the history of African expression and its survival in, and adaptation to, the New World. As LeRoi Jones writes,

The very nature of slavery in America dictated the way in which African culture could be adapted. Thus, a Dahomey river god ceremony had no chance of survival in this country at all unless it was incorporated into an analogous rite that was present in the new culture. [...] The Negro’s way in this part of the Western world was adaptation and reinterpretation.¹²

There has often been a tendency, especially among ethnographic musicologists, to look for African elements in African-American music and the music it helped spawn at the expense of reflecting on the American elements. Such accounts have contributed to the generalised theories of black music criticised by Philip Tagg.¹³ Jones addresses this oversight by highlighting the necessary mutability of the convergent cultures, pointing out that, while elements from both did survive, neither remained unchanged. Kweli seems to acknowledge this in the *Reflection Eternal: Train of Thought* album, the very title of which suggests, like Haggard, the timelessness of memory whilst also hinting at the kind of meandering journey memory can be. In ‘Memories Live’, Kweli writes,

I dive deep into my mind, see I got a treasury that
Float through my head like a sweet melody
What you tellin’ me? Reflection is a collection of memories
Definitely this is what Hip Hop is meant to be

Eventually I knew I'd run into hi technology
It was only a matter of time like centuries

The last two lines carry at least a double meaning. Hi Tek is the name of Kweli's musical partner and this section immediately precedes Kweli's reminiscence about his early days with the DJ/producer. At the same time the meeting of mind with machine and the realisation of what the two can produce together suggests a parallel with Jones' point about the meeting of cultures. The reference to the 'sweet melody' also highlights the other important meeting at work in songs, that between the literate and the oral. Tricia Rose attempts to tie these strands together:

Rap music blurs the distinction between literate and oral modes of communication by altering and yet sustaining important aspects of African-American folk orality while embedding oral practices in the technology itself. Rap's orality is altered and highly informed by the technology that produces it; and in rap, oral logic informs its technological practices.¹⁴

Clearly such a two way process has implications for the way lyrics are voiced. If rap's predominantly staccato vocal delivery was initially shaped by its use as accompaniment to the beats, scratches and samples of the early hip hop DJs, it has also grown into its role so effectively that it exists as a template for writers and DJs to complement. In other words, vocals have both taken and followed the lead in rap music, creating a seamless triangulation between lyric, voice and accompaniment. The voice can be as important in setting the rhythm of a rap song as the more conventional devices of drum and bass. Lyrics, therefore, tend to be lengthy and indulge in numerous internal rhyme schemes and phonemic experimentation. These last two qualities are not unusual in country music either but the method is somewhat different. In 'My Favorite Memory', Merle Haggard vocalises the lyrics slowly and luxuriantly, as if to enjoy the perusal the song speaks about, his voice flitting up and down to float on some notes and crack on others. He takes the opportunity to experiment with the word "favorite", pronouncing it in the first instance as three distinct syllables /fəvəreɪt/ (Track 12, 0:15) and in the second as the naturally vocalised /fəveɪt/ (0:59). The vocal line throughout is vertically counterbalanced against the horizontal rhythm of the drums and bass. The melismatic variations added by Haggard to certain words, such as "pertains" and "change", serve both to create internal

rhymes on the /ɛI/ phoneme and to inject a level of emotional reminiscence appropriate to the song's subject matter.

That we can attempt to read such meanings into vocal sounds suggests the extent to which the utterance can be viewed as a separate entity to the uttered, the distinction Roland Barthes makes between *énoncé* and *énonciation*.¹⁵ Writing about the George Jones song 'A Window Up Above', Nicholas Dawidoff suggests that 'Jones has scored his singing [...] so that you can concentrate on the sound, ignore the words, and still understand what the song is about'.¹⁶ His reasoning for this is that the combination of melodic shifts and vocal timbre are enough to relay to a listener the "mood" of what he is singing. The suggestion is that, as humans, we can respond to signifiers such as "joy", "pain", "confusion" or "helplessness" without having to register exact linguistic properties. The range of emotion in the country vocal is a widely remarked-upon phenomenon and what Dawidoff says of Jones might equally be applied to Haggard. In suggesting that vocal phrasing alone could guide us to the meaning of the song, Dawidoff implicitly suggests that shared experience – that which bridges the gap between performer and audience and makes communication possible and desirable – resides as much in the way things are said as in what is said. This is undoubtedly true and serves to make up one of the attributes by which authenticity in performance style is measured, a point I will return to in the next chapter.

However, for all the emotion that the sound carries it also, in the case of songs, carries linguistic meaning(s). It might well be possible to 'ignore the words', as Dawidoff suggests, but I find this idea of the multi-semantic possibilities in the vocalised word suggestive of the way in which *énoncé* works alongside *énonciation* rather than replaces it. While it is often said of George Jones that he is able to make vocally effective music from otherwise uninteresting lyrics there are numerous country singers and songwriters for whom the written word is vitally important. Many of those already mentioned in this dissertation, such as Steve Earle, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, would fall into this category.

In much of rap a rather different contradiction emerges when we think about *énoncé* and *énonciation*. Lyrics in rap songs are voluminous and vocal delivery is often, though not always, fast-paced. Rap styles are highly varied as flow is as important a way to distinguish oneself from the competition as lyrical

ability. ‘Rhyming’ is not just about finding phonemically similar language items, but also about delivering them through a microphone in such a way that a personal rhythmic pattern or time signature is established. Because of the need for rhythmic flow and the “horizontal” impulse necessary for keeping the flow, words are “played” in a very different way to that used by a country singer, their *énonciation* requiring motion rather than emotion. The rhythmic/metric drive towards phonemically similar sounds leads to extended bouts of wordplay such as those in the Talib Kweli track quoted earlier.

Much of ‘Memories Live’, and especially the third verse, (DCD Track 13, 2:52 to 3:52) utilises the sounds /ɪ/ and /ɪ̃/ (also the final syllable of “memories”) to set up a verbal pattern that, once articulated, becomes a rhythm to offset and accompany the instrumental rhythm. In this way, rap uses the voice as an instrument in a slightly different way from most popular music, the vocal providing a “horizontal” or “drum-like” sonic addition to the music of the piece in counterpoint to the “vertical” melodic and harmonic shifts of other instruments such as keyboards and guitars. Stress is put on certain phonemic sounds, often at the expense of “proper” pronunciation and the general delivery is staccato as opposed to the melismatic variations given to words/sounds in much popular music. Parallels do exist in other genres - Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is an obvious example while much hardcore and thrash metal music relies on horizontal, rhythmic vocalisation - but the dominant form of such an approach is undoubtedly rap music.

An example of verbal rhythm being used to signify emotion can be found on Eminem’s ‘Stan’, a hit single from his album *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000). The track, presented as a series of letters to rap star Slim Shady (a persona used throughout the album and its predecessor *The Slim Shady LP*) from Stan, his ‘biggest fan’, makes explicit reference to Shady’s past, his family and his work:

See, I’m just like you in a way
 I never knew my father neither
 He used to always cheat on my mom and beat her
 I can relate to what you’re sayin’ in your songs
 So when I have a shitty day I drift away and put ‘em on¹⁷

The main drive of the narrative, however, is the increasing frustration Stan feels as Slim fails to respond to his letters. The final ‘letter’ is in fact a cassette that Stan

records prior to killing himself and his pregnant wife. This element of virtual reality allows Eminem to voice Stan's increasingly hysterical outbursts, culminating in a typically orgiastic burst of language:

I love you Slim, we could've been together, think about it
 You've ruined it now, I hope you can't sleep and you dream about it
 And when you dream I hope you can't sleep and you scream about it
 I hope your conscience eats at you and you can't breathe without me

(DCD Track 14, 1:09 to 1:21)

By contrast, Slim's reply, which comes in the last verse, is delivered in a measured, steady tone, the voice slightly deeper, displaying less possibility of hysterics. Shady is presented as the level-headed person, Stan as the insane one who really does the things Shady only talks about doing.

'Stan' effectively showcases past experiences and memories as a menu of choice, but the memories chosen are for the use of the individual and not the collective. It seems Eminem/Shady does not want his audience to identify with him. In suggesting this the rapper is operating at a very different level from Talib Kweli, though their lyrical and vocal gait is very similar. In 'Memories Live', the lyrics are too voluminous to dwell on the subtleties of timbre variation and the vocal rhythm ploughs horizontally on with the inevitable rhythmic motion of a train (of thought), the modulations of the surrounding landscape being provided by the sampled vocals and instrumental loops set in motion by Hi Tek. There is, however, one important section of the track where Kweli the rapper allows himself a break from the breakneck delivery to repeat one line three times:

Like when my parents first split up, yo I was illin'
 Seem like some years they was together for the sake of the children
 And I love them for that, I don't know if they saw that
 So I'm a say it and convey it when the world play it
 I'm a say it and convey it when the world play it (x2) (DCD Track 13, 2:14 to 2:30)

The desire to take time out in song to show appreciation to family is another way in which memory and experience are reflected upon. This is something that is generally extended in rap CD liner notes and in the "shout-outs" often found in the introductory tracks to albums, where the extended family, or posse, is also recognised. Family is considered an important factor in country music too. In 'Thanks to Uncle John', Merle Haggard pays tribute to the family that took him in

after he left home following his father's death. Where Kweli and Haggard take the opportunity to publicly testify their thanks, Iris Dement attempts to reassure herself that her presence in the world and in others' memories is some kind of validation of existence:

My life, it don't count for nothin'
 When I look at this world, I feel so small
 My life, it's only a season
 A passing September that no one will recall

Chorus:
 But I gave joy to my mother
 I made my lover smile
 And I can give comfort to my friends when they're hurting
 I can make it seem better for awhile¹⁸

Dement's album *My Life* is almost wholly concerned with the effects of memories and shared experiences. She sings about the communal benefits of music in 'Sweet Is the Melody', reminisces about 'Childhood Memories' and grapples with the responsibilities of everyday life while reflecting on her father's life in 'No Time to Cry'. She also provides an essay about her late father to the liner notes. There is also an evocation of earlier styles of music in the way she performs her songs. The instrumentation she favours could have been used at any point in country music's history: acoustic guitar, piano, fiddle, mandolin, upright bass. In her singing voice she manages an "old-fashioned" delivery by singing slightly too loud, seemingly unmindful of the possibilities of microphone technology, in a voice that has been described as both 'pretty' and 'raw' and which tends to waver around notes, adding to the air of "naturalness" in her lyrics and instrumentation.¹⁹

Dement further references the past by covering songs like Lefty Frizzell's 'Mom & Dad's Waltz' and the Carter Family's 'Troublesome Waters'. Covers such as these, along with the many tribute albums country artists appear on (Dement has contributed to albums of songs by Jimmie Rodgers, Merle Haggard and Tom T. Hall), help forge links between the past and present and open a dialogue between artists and eras. As S. Renee Dechert writes, making reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* in a comparison between the Carter Family's 'No Depressions' and alt. country group Uncle Tupelo's 1990 cover of it,

When artists allude to texts that have preceded them, they do more than simply echo the ideas of earlier authors; they also call for a reinterpretation, both of the original work and their own, in light of those allusions, effectively opening a ‘dialogue’ or conversation between their text and those that have preceded it.²⁰

One thing that artists doing cover versions must do to keep up their side of the conversation is to make a song their own. Dement does this in her version of Haggard’s ‘Big City’ by removing the electric instruments and presenting the song in her normal acoustic setting. As with her own material she affects a strident vocal technique at the microphone that renders it a “mere” recording device in contrast to Haggard’s method of “pouring” his baritone into the microphone at roughly speaking volume. Dement sounds as if she is singing loud to hear her voice above the instruments, Haggard as though he is listening to himself on headphones (which he probably is). The overall effect is to give Haggard’s version a more “urban” sound. The front cover of the original *Big City* sleeve showed Haggard slumped in a city hotel room, an electric guitar in his hands, ground down by city life. The back featured an example of “Big Sky Country”, mountains, lakes and trees, the land the singer in the hotel room is dreaming of. From the two recordings of ‘Big City’, it is Dement who sounds like she will realise the dream.

Interestingly, on hearing her version of his song, Haggard is reported to have said that it corresponded to how he had wanted it to sound. Nicholas Dawidoff describes a recording session involving Haggard and Dement, where Haggard is recording two of the younger singer’s songs and inadvertently making her reappraise her work through his interpretation of it. Hearing Haggard perform ‘No Time To Cry’, Dement voices similar feelings to those expressed by Haggard on hearing her recording of his work, namely that it corresponded to how she had always imagined the song.²¹ Reading Dement’s comments and hearing Haggard’s recording of her song (available on his album *1996*) a number of questions are raised about the relationships between lyric, persona, autobiography and vocal that would be worthy of further study. Here I only wish to note how well Haggard and Dement seem to illustrate the dialogic process described by Dechert.²²

In rap music it is extremely rare to find cover versions of previous rap tracks and yet the core process of constructing the backing to new tracks developed from a different type of (re)covering via the practice of sampling. As

old recordings were cut up, scratched, sampled and reused to form new musical pieces, so dialogues were set up between artists and eras. Though samples were traditionally taken from old soul and rock performances it has also become common to “quote” from other rap records, as when Jay-Z samples lines from Nas and Outkast on his track ‘Rap Game/Crack Game’. Tricia Rose suggests that sampling ‘affirms black musical history and locates these “past” sounds in the “present”’. She believes such an affirmation needs to be made because of the short shelf life black musical products have historically experienced relative to predominantly white genres such as rock. It could be argued that this has more to do with the total predominance of rock music over all genres and the implicit suggestion by Rose, by differentiating black music, of a prioritisation of “non-black” genres is somewhat inaccurate.²³ Many of these genres, including country, have been diverted into the ghettos of specialist markets and require the kind of comprehensive (and largely amateur) recovery exemplified by the 1989 *Sounds of the South* conference.²⁴ Rose does have a valid point about the need (even duty) to research the less-heard musics of the past and that rap artists have a most effective way of going about this:

For the most part, sampling, not unlike versioning practices in Caribbean musics, is about paying homage, an invocation of another’s voice to help you to say what you want to say. It is also a means of archival research, a process of musical and cultural archeology.²⁵

The dialogue this allows between different eras becomes part of the very fabric of rap’s sonic matrix, allowing for new meanings to be developed in new contexts. The sampled voice becomes an instrument interwoven with the rapper’s vocal and adds texture to what is often already a multi-vocal performance. Rap music tends to work in verse form with the verse either separated by a chorus or punctuated with a repeated refrain. In Eminem’s ‘Stan’ the chorus is provided by the repeated first verse of Dido’s song “Thank You”. Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek use the “bringing back sweet memories” line from Ann Peebles’ ‘I Can’t Stand the Rain’ to set up an appropriate refrain between the reminiscences of ‘Memories Live’. A technique such as this should draw attention to the artifice at work in the multi-layered rap song but in fact it allows a continuation of the illusion that the rapper is addressing the listener as he/she talks over and around the ‘alien’ chorus. In ‘Stan’, the fact that Eminem voices only ‘his’ and Stan’s words, disdaining the

possibility of providing a chorus himself, allows for an almost cinematic ‘reality’ to emerge, where both characters, Dido’s song and the rain are all ‘happening’ at the same time.

In country and rap, however, there also remain notable instances where the very act of performing and/or recording are highlighted. Though parallels exist between these genres and others in the way extra-diegetic insertions occur, I would argue that their meaning here can be read differently. Richard Middleton provides a useful mini-trajectory of the changing possibilities of subject pronouns in songs that betrays the association of authenticity often applied to the “I” of the singer:

In ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, Elvis identifies the ‘broken-hearted lovers’ variously as ‘they’ and ‘you’ as well as ‘I’, opening up a gap between *énoncé* and *énonciation*; and when James Brown boasts that ‘papa’s got a brand new bag’, it would seem that we hear Brown, the performer, looking at and describing himself as ‘papa’. When Johnny Rotten, in ‘Holidays in the Sun’, admits that ‘I don’t understand this bit at all’, the gap is consciously manipulated.²⁶

Middleton’s point is that the gap, once highlighted, makes identification with the narrative less possible than identification with the performance. He suggests that this complicates patterns of identification between singer and listener and that the gap is ‘only intensified by the way that the recording process detaches the sound from any sight of the singer’.²⁷ This can, he argues, be a stimulus to the imagination and, with the listener’s knowledge of technical processes and consumption of media related to the singer, the gaps can be filled. This knowledge of the elements at play, like Rotten’s conscious manipulation of narrative devices, implies a kind of postmodern pastiche at work in the production and reception of songs and this is where I think non-diegetic elements are used differently in country and rap. When Lou Reed remarks, in ‘Walk on the Wild Side’, that ‘the coloured girls go doo-doo-doo’, he is not asking his backing singers to join in (though they do), he is telling us that this is what coloured girls do in songs. When Merle Haggard starts conducting his band in ‘Bareback’ there is an altogether different interaction between singer, musicians and audience.²⁸

It is quite common in country and rap music to attempt to recreate the experience of a live performance in the recording studio. Whether one is listening to Hank Williams’ radio broadcasts or a *Lyricist Lounge* compilation, there is a

sense of contradiction inherent in the needs of the record producers to present a “studio quality” product and the desire to present a series of performances as the audience experienced them. It could be argued that, while a live performance provides the opportunity for performer and audience to share experiences, these live(d) experiences can only be “captured” or “kept” through repetition, hence the need for the recorded work. This applies to both performer and audience in different ways. The audience can never *fully* retain the memory of the live(d) performance and so the recorded work acts as a prompt. The performer can retain the memory through repeated performance but receives benefits from the recording process - in addition to the obvious financial rewards - by creating a series of documented experiences. These in turn provide reference points for future performers, maintaining the kinds of dialogues mentioned earlier.

In Jerry Jeff Walker’s ‘David & Me’, a song that finds its narrator (Walker?) reminiscing with an old friend and fellow musician, there is a musically-made suggestion that communally known songs can be used to strengthen the sense of memory and shared experience evoked in the lyrics. ‘Hey,’ “Walker” intones, seemingly mid-verse, ‘I see you brought a fiddle there – well, let’s play some’, before launching into a brief, seemingly impromptu, routine in which his vocal melodies are matched by Stuart Duncan’s fiddle, a move actually designed as a vehicle for Duncan to bring the song to a logical narrative closure (DCD Track 18, 3:32 to 4:05).²⁹

A similar example can be found in Eric B. and Rakim’s ‘Paid in Full’, a song about the possibilities of music-making as a source of financial and cultural independence. After Rakim has rapped the song’s lyrics, Eric B starts a conversation with him about the time the two of them have spent recording their album and how it has kept them from their girlfriends. The conversation then spreads directs itself to the mixing desk and the engineer, Elai Tubo:

RAKIM Let’s just pump the music up and count our money

ERIC B. Yo, but check this out. Yo, Elai! Turn the bass down and just let the beat keep on rockin’.
And we outta here³⁰

The effect of this “interruption” is to locate the song’s lyrics concerning the need to be ‘paid in full’ for their creative work with the duo’s lived experience as recording artists. A sense of naturalness, even effortlessness, to what they do is set

up by the suggestion that they can walk in and out of the studio at their leisure to lay down their tracks. This is simultaneously belied by the song's acknowledgement of their reliance on the studio as a means to make a living and by the fact that, before they can "leave" the studio, Eric B. feels the need to take an extended scratch and sample solo (DCD Track 19, 2:14 to 3:47). For Tricia Rose, this track explicitly addresses the lived contradiction between expressing artistic freedom under industry control by 'resist[ing] the masked and naturalized dominance of the institutional structure by overtly expressing its presence and logic'.³¹ For Paul Gilroy, Eric B and Rakim's highlighting of the workings of the corporate machinery, along with their reinvention of the music of black predecessors such as James Brown (in 'I Know You Got Soul, from the *Paid In Full* album), highlights their commitment to 'a ghetto constituency', a public sphere that is 'defined against the dominant alternative to which blacks enjoy only restricted access'. By suggesting that the power manifested by this duo is 'also the force that binds their listeners together into a moral, even a political community', Gilroy touches on an aspect that is crucial to the ways in which a sense of belonging contributes towards the authentication of community representatives. It is with these issue in mind that the next chapter opens.³²

Notes

¹ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 34.

² David Toop, 'The Evolving Language of Rap' in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing* ed. by John Potter (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 51.

³ See Alex Ogg and David Upshall, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap* (London: Channel 4 Books/Macmillan, 1999), pp. 140-143.

⁴ Alanna Nash, *Behind Closed Doors: Talking with the Legends of Country Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 154.

⁵ Merle Haggard, 'Are The Good Times Really Over For Good (I Wish A Buck Was Still Silver)', Track 7 on *Big City* (Epic/Legacy 495246 2, 1999) [originally released on Epic, 1981]. DCD Track 10.

⁶ Roger Fowler, *Language in the News* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 64.

⁷ Merle Haggard, 'Wishing All These Old Things Were New', Track 1 on *If I Could Only Fly* (Anti. Inc. 6593-2, 2000). DCD Track 11 [excerpt].

⁸ Nash, p. 166.

⁹ Daniel Cooper, liner notes to CD reissue of *Big City* by Merle Haggard, p. 5.

¹⁰ Merle Haggard, 'My Favorite Memory', Track 2 on *Big City*. DCD Track 12.

¹¹ Talib Kweli & Hi-Tek, 'Memories Live', Track 7 on *Reflection Eternal: Train of Thought* (Rawkus/EMI 072435 26143 25, 2000). DCD Track 13.

¹² LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1995), p. 27.

¹³ Philip Tagg, 'Open Letter: "Black Music", "Afro-American Music" and "European Music"' in *Popular Music* 8 (1989), pp. 285-295.

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 85.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 10-11, 145, 161, 164, 198, 201-2.

¹⁶ Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 205.

¹⁷ Eminem, 'Stan', Track 3 on *The Marshall Mathers LP* (Aftermath/Interscope 490 629-2, 2000). DCD Track 14 [excerpt].

¹⁸ Iris Dement, 'My Life', Track 10 on *My Life* (Warner Bros. 9362-45493-2, 1994). DCD Track 15.

¹⁹ Dawidoff, p. 250.

²⁰ S. Renee Dechert, "'Oh, What a Life a Mess Can Be": Uncle Tupelo, Bakhtin, and the Dialogue of Alternative Country Music' in *Country Music Annual* ed. by Charles K. Wolfe and James Akenson (University of Kentucky Press, 2001), p. 73.

²¹ Dawidoff, pp. 250-251.

²² Iris Dement's version of 'Big City' is Track 2 on *Tulare Dust: A Songwriters' Tribute To Merle Haggard* by Various Artists (Hightone, HCD 8058, 1994); Haggard's cover of Dement's 'No Time To Cry' is Track 2 on *1996* (Curb CURCD 022, 1996). Excerpts from the two versions of 'Big City' are DCD Tracks 16 and 17.

²³ Rose, p. 89.

²⁴ The papers of which are published in *Sounds of the South* ed. by David W. Patterson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

²⁵ Rose, p. 79.

²⁶ Richard Middleton, 'Rock Singing' in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing* ed. by John Potter (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 39.

²⁷ Middleton, 'Rock Singing', p. 39.

²⁸ Merle Haggard, 'Bareback', Track 6 on *If I Could Only Fly*.

²⁹ Jerry Jeff Walker, 'David & Me', Track 11 on *Gypsy Songman* (Rykodisc RCD 20071, 1987). DCD Track 18.

³⁰ Eric B. and Rakim, 'Paid In Full', Track 6 on *Paid in Full* (Island IMCD p/842589-2, 1987). DCD Track 19.

³¹ Rose, p. 95.

³² Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994), p. 41.

CHAPTER THREE

ESTABLISHING AUTHENTICITY

Yeah
I don't wear no Stetson
But I'm willin' to bet son
That I'm a big a Texan as you are
Cause
There's a girl in her bare feet
'Sleep on the back seat
An that trunk's full a Pearl...an Lone Star
- Terry Allen, 'Amarillo Highway'¹

Though I'm not the first king of controversy
I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley
To do Black Music so selfishly
And use it to get myself wealthy
- Eminem, 'Without Me'²

In this chapter I want to return to the topics covered so far - place, race, memory and experience - and examine them in the light of the necessity felt by producers and consumers of rap and country to establish authenticity for themselves. Authenticity is a difficult concept to theorise, beset as it is with numerous definitions and ideologies, yet it is one that those involved in the production and consumption of these popular musics seem to instinctively comprehend. For the purposes of this chapter I am defining authenticity as the cause and result of the ways performers and audiences project notions of justified belonging (i.e. to certain communities) and lifestyle. These notions, crucial as they are to a sense of identity, should not, however, be considered in isolation but rather as an addition to the ways we use music for pleasure.

As I have attempted to show in the first chapter of this dissertation, notions of place and race are central in country and rap music, a fact further evidenced in the quotations above by country singer Terry Allen and rapper Eminem. Both artists are interesting in the way they theorise the positions they hold in their respective genres. Allen jokingly references his Texan roots in a song strategically placed at the beginning of his 1979 album *Lubbock (on everything)*, a record that takes a number of liberties with the standard elements of the country genre (a common feature of the “progressive country” trend of the 1970s, of which I will say more later). By laying claim to country (and especially Texan)

authenticity right at the start of his project, Allen is able to soften the abrasive nature of some of the lyrical observations and musical experimentation that he mixes into an otherwise straightforward country sound over the course of the album. This strategy, coupled with his employment of noted Texan session players, helps to suggest to his (particularly male) listeners that he is laughing *with* them and not *at* them and that he is not acting in a manner that might be considered by his fellows to be “high hand”.

Eminem, who from the start of his career has shown a solipsistic streak remarkable even in the autobiographically-obsessed genre of rap, expresses a knowledge of one crucial key to his success. In previous songs, such as ‘The Way I Am’ from 2000’s *The Marshall Mathers LP*, the rapper had complained about the controversy that surrounded his music and his public persona and about claims that he was a “wigga” (a white person attempting to emulate the style and mannerisms of black people, essentially an update of Norman Mailer’s “White Negro”). Here, however, he seems to reach a resigned acceptance of his position in the predominantly black world of rap and, rather than asserting any claim to authenticity, inverts the debate by knowingly placing himself in a tradition of white appropriation of black music.

That artists working a quarter century into the modern manifestations of their respective genres should feel the need to assert their relation to those genres will perhaps come as no surprise. Modern popular music, as much as any other contemporary cultural form, has found numerous ways to theorise itself within a relatively short period of time. Yet these artists doing so by asserting their authority as representatives highlights only one of the interrelated elements in the construction and evolution of authenticity within popular music. For if authenticity is both fabricated (as Richard Peterson claims) and polemical (as Lionel Trilling notes), then the ways in which it is fabricated and made polemical must be seen, in the arena of popular music, as the result of efforts by artists, consumers and culture industry workers to respond to each other’s expectations.³

Some useful indications of the machinery of authentication can be found in the March 2002 edition of the American magazine *Entertainment Weekly*. The cover featured country singer Alan Jackson next to a legend that read, ‘A Cowboy Comes Through When The Country (And Country Music) Needs It Most’. This rather cumbersome line was explained in an accompanying article that painted

Jackson as a legitimate spokesman for both his nation, following the release of a song he wrote in reaction to the September 2001 aeroplane attacks against New York and Washington, and his musical genre, in which he is seen (at least by some) as a representative of traditional country values. The article is interesting for a number of issues it raises, especially those around the image of the country singer as cowboy. While I do not have space here to discuss the extent to which the cowboy is a fabricated figure, it is clear that he serves as one of the principle iconic representations of how the USA chooses to recall its past and to present it in the popular imagination. It has also led to what might be termed “cowboyism”, whereby certain ritual-iconic mannerisms, speech gestures and even ways of thinking associated with the cowboy and his attendant lifestyle are adopted into common parlance. In country music this has produced terms such as ‘the man in black’ (Johnny Cash), ‘the red-headed stranger’ (Willie Nelson) and ‘the outlaws’ (Nelson and Waylon Jennings), though reggae and rap artists have also been keen at times to appropriate the imagery. It comes as no great surprise to see the readiness with which a cowboy speaking to the nation at a troubled time is greeted in a mainstream publication. While the article notes the curiosity with which ‘urban rock and hip-hop partialists’ might view the popularity of Jackson’s song and accompanying album, its writer Chris Willman soon succumbs to the heavily-gendered worldview of cowboyism when noting that, in the temporary chart absence of female country acts such as Shania Twain, Faith Hill and The Dixie Chicks due to maternal obligations, ‘it was time for the menfolk to step back up to the plate’.⁴

The image of cowboy-as-hero is equally important (Jackson is referred to in the article as ‘a hero in a white hat’) and, as in most Westerns and Hollywood action films, it is deemed more effective if the hero is a reluctant one, only goaded into action when a special need for him arises. Willman writes a telling passage about Jackson and the relationship between this aspect of the hero and country music:

If you used a computer to dial up the quintessential country star, it’d be Alan Jackson: a 6’4” drink of water with a 10-gallon hat (and there *is* hair under there), a rich baritone, a predilection for the outdoors, an unpretentiously poetic sensibility, and absolutely no dormant ambition ever to do a Chris Gaines project. (p. 29)

The reference at the end of the quotation is to a project undertaken by the biggest country music star of the 1990s, Garth Brooks, in which he created a rock-singing alter ego, Chris Gaines. Here Willman is saying that, in not wishing to attempt any such crossover to the rock or pop charts, Jackson is retaining his authenticity as a country singer. This line is taken further later in the article when Jackson is quoted on his feelings about the country music industry in Nashville. Following the success of the September 11-themed ‘Where Were You?’ his label, Arista Nashville, received interest from pop radio stations that wanted to play the record but remove the already minimal fiddle and steel guitar from the track. Jackson refused but it is interesting to note that a supposedly country-friendly record label should consider even asking him to make these “cosmetic” changes.

Jackson is the type of country singer for whom place and background is crucially important. In songs such as ‘Where I Come From’, ‘Chattahoochee’, ‘Midnight in Montgomery’ and ‘Dallas’ he references places that are important to his growing up in Georgia or that serve as iconic locations (such as the site of Hank Williams’ grave in Montgomery, Alabama). Place is tied in with personal and popular memory in these songs in a way that strengthens the traditionalism at the heart of his music, with the role of memory in the modern world explicitly referenced in the track ‘www.memory’. For Jackson, the preservation of tradition and memory is an important struggle, one he does not consider the country music industry to be interested in. As he remarks in the Willman article, ‘It seems like Nashville is always apologizing for its roots, and trying to get away from the wagon wheels and cowboy hats’ (p. 31).

Another strand of Jackson’s songwriting centres on other recording artists, both country and non-country. In songs like ‘Three Minute Positive Not Too Country Up-Tempo Love Song’, ‘Gone Country’ and ‘Murder on Music Row’ he spoofs both the artists who use elements of country music in their work without having any commitment to the genre and the record industry marketers who encourage such practices. Jackson clearly sees himself in a tradition of authentic country music makers that stretches from at least Hank Williams onwards. Despite his popularity and the generous airplay allowed his music, Jackson opines that ‘if I were a young artist today making the same records, I’d have a hard time getting a deal and getting airplay. And my stuff’s basically no different from what Hank Williams was doing in the ’50s’ (p. 31). This

observation echoes a point made by Richard Peterson about the changing nature of authenticity over time:

What is *authenticity*? The dead Hank Williams was the authentic iconic representation of country music in 1953, but if this rail-thin, flatland-accented Alabama boy wearing a stylized cowboy outfit had auditioned to record for Polk Brockman in 1923 singing his hillbilly cheating songs set in the honky-tonk mode, would Brockman have invited him to record? And if [...] Williams had auditioned at a Nashville writers' night in 1993, would he have been hailed as authentic country? I think not.⁵

Peterson's point is that authenticity is a term that can never be given a fixed definition. In attempting to answer his own question he offers a series of dictionary definitions of *authentic*, two of which I believe are particularly useful to this chapter. These are "that which is authenticated" (by an authority) and that which is "credible in a current context". Peterson's examples of Hank Williams in the 1920s or 1990s clearly refer to both the changing nature of authorities and current contexts.

Another aspect of the multi-faceted nature of authenticity in country music can be inferred from the fact that many apparently "country" artists and their fans would not consider Alan Jackson the representative face of truly authentic country music, but would class him as yet another "hat act" from Nashville taking the genre into ever more commercial waters and diluting its true spirit. This is a point I will return to later when discussing aspects of "hard-core" and "soft-shell" music; here I only wish to note that the authorities arbitrating what can and cannot be considered authentic are not just the industry people mentioned in the Peterson quotation but the artists and fans as well. I also wish at this point to turn to rap music, where a similar process can be observed.

In a recent study Adam Krims has attempted to outline what he terms a 'musical poetics of rap' and to ally his musicological findings to notions of identity and place. In the process of doing so he has felt it necessary to outline a genre system for rap music that takes into account the numerous styles and audiences of this wide-ranging genre. Arguing that his chosen categorisations, while they do enable greater accuracy in musicological readings, are constructed and maintained by fans and artists as much as academics like himself, Krims points out that the varying sub-genres are placed against each other to establish notions of authenticity in rap:

Each genre [...] carries its own regimes of verisimilitude. In other words, if one of the principal validating strategies of rap music involves “representing” and “keeping it real” – in other words deploying authenticity symbolically – then that ethos is formed (and reflected) differently in each genre. In fact, fans of each genre not infrequently tout theirs as the true rap genre, asserting likewise that fans of other genres have somehow betrayed something essential about rap music, perhaps hip-hop culture as well.⁶

I will return to the occasionally perceived differences between *rap music* and *hip-hop culture* later. For now it is interesting to note that the word “rap” in this quotation could be changed to “country” with no loss of meaning and with equal relevance to that genre (or series of genres). Krims also makes the interesting point that the defining boundaries of his genre system can also be marked by geographical differences, suggesting that authenticity changes not only according to *who* authenticates and *when* they do it, as we saw in Peterson’s definitions, but also *where* they do it.

In a British-based magazine like *Hip-Hop Connection* a lot of space is given to ways in which rap music can be authenticated away from what is seen as its “true source”, the black urban neighbourhoods of the USA. Local artists and fans establish credentials for themselves and others to show how “real” their involvement in rap is. In a letter printed in the April 2002 edition, a fan relates how he is ‘more of a fuckin’ gangsta than Puffy’, referring to Puff Daddy, an artist frequently criticised in hip-hop circles for his lack of authenticity. The writer explains that he is in the middle of a four-year sentence in a young offenders centre in Northern Ireland. He then points out that he only listens to black gangsta rap and that he has been doing so since he was five years old. The efforts made by this young music fan are a clear example of what Richard Peterson calls ‘authenticity work’, a concept I will return to presently. First I would like to look at the aspects of violence and misogyny in rap so obviously enjoyed by this letter writer and fans like him.⁷

Simon Reynolds has described rap’s ‘interminable catalogue of boasts, threats and flaunted wealth’ as offering ‘an x-ray view of capitalism’s primary drives of will-to-power, alpha-male display and ravenous appetite.’⁸ Such interpretation, of rap as mirror to the society that produced it, has particular validity in the popular music press and among fans of the “mack/pimp” and “reality rap” genres.⁹ There has been, from the outset, a large amount of

controversy surrounding these genres, which has only increased in recent years with the immense popularity of Eminem. Debates raged in the letters pages of music magazines over the misogyny, homophobia and violence on display in his albums. I will not linger on those debates here but it is worth noting the aspect of his and his fellow rappers' work that is most often used to deflect criticism, namely that the songs, however grounded in real-life experiences, are nevertheless works of fiction.

For Mark Anthony Neal 'ghetto noir' in song and video narrative has come to fill a void in black cultural representation produced by the relative lack of black screen heroes in the cinema.¹⁰ In recent years, however, a number of rappers associated with such narratives, such as Ice Cube, Snoop Doggy Dogg and Eminem, have followed their success in the world of music with appearances in films, often transferring the personae created on their records into screen characters. As with the conflation of country singers with cowboys and Westerns, these film roles have generally centred on the heroes and villains of action films. The idea of the hero is taken up by Reynolds and Joy Press in their analysis of gangsta rap and its filmic offshoots, where they suggest that 'ghetto exploitation movies like *Menace II Society* and *Trespass* are today's Westerns; young white males learn how to swagger like a "real man" from gangsta rappers like Dr Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg'.¹¹ The widespread condemnation of these narratives is at odds with the canonisation of white film directors such as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Quentin Tarantino, in whose work such preoccupations are bypassed in the name of 'art'. Ice-T has frequently made the point that the criminal-themed narratives of white country artists like Johnny Cash have remained similarly unhindered by the concerns of the moral majority.

Eminem is a white rapper but he is working within a genre associated with black artists who have provided the structural syntax with which he has involved himself. Many have said that his whiteness has already precluded him from the more ferocious attacks and moral panics that have previously been caused by black rap artists. Hip-hop expert Nelson George sums this up when he says of Eminem:

As a white rapper, he's no threat. His race doesn't account for a disproportional size of the jail population. Black rappers are seen as revolutionaries – remember that the FBI in

1990 issued a warning against Niggaz With Attitude, citing the group as a threat to national security. Eminem? He's just a pop star.¹²

Eminem, like his black contemporaries in gangsta rap, sells millions of records worldwide. The same uneasy blend of reality and stage-managed violence that makes *The Jerry Springer Show* compulsive viewing for millions of people has ensured Eminem a loyal fan base – people want to hear what he is going to say or do next.

The alienation that rap music can produce is rooted in its inception as a subversive musical form, an element that ties it in with a history of black musics that Kodwo Eshun has labelled 'sonic fictions'. For Eshun the emphasis placed on black music's ties with social reality is false – innovative black music 'alienates itself from the human':

Everywhere, the 'street' is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic explaining all Black Music, conveniently mishearing antisocial surrealism as social realism.¹³

I would argue that realism and 'otherness' go hand in hand in the consumption of rap music, especially when undertaken by the young white males who make up such a large part of the audience for gangsta rap. The development of hip-hop from a New York subculture to a global commodity occurred in a relatively short period of time. "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash was a Top Ten hit in the UK within a month of its official release in 1982 and provided British youth with a new unknown. As Jeremy J. Beadle writes:

'The Message' cut across most of its chart competition of the time [...] simply because it sounded like the authentic voice of the ghetto – especially to those who [...] hadn't been within a million miles of anything which could properly be styled a ghetto.¹⁴

This suggests Edward Said's thesis on *Orientalism* whereby Westerners, having constructed the idea of the Orient, came to both physically and mentally colonise this real-yet-imagined hemisphere. This resulted in an appropriation of knowledge of the 'reality' of the Orient that would come to negate actual lived Oriental experience and validate the necessity for Empire and domination. Jason Toynbee writes of 'the performer whose appeal to a white audience, whatever her/his intention might be, is precisely as primitive and hyper-racialized Other', citing

gangsta rap as the prime contemporary example.¹⁵ This sub-genre, which seemed at one point to have dominated the whole genre, is the one that has caused the most moral panics, sold the most records and obsessed the media the most. While complying in the construction and domination of the ‘other’, the Orientalist also celebrates and adopts its style. When Beadle says ‘hip hop was more than just a musical style, it offered a whole attitude, a style which for young consumers in the UK looked attractively alien,’ he is both describing the consumers as Orientalists and sustaining complicity with Orientalism himself.¹⁶ This is a thorny problem with the application of theory, as Said himself found when his text seemed to suggest that any non-Oriental writing on the Orient was, in classic Orientalist fashion, invalidating the subject matter. Other contradictions emerge when we consider that American rappers are of course westerners themselves and are operating from the very heart of the dominant nation. However, Said’s point about *a way of thinking* has enough theoretical weight to transcend geography and it cannot be denied that ghetto noir depicts what is for many people an unknown territory.

An example of Orientalist writing on rap can be found in the book *Signifying Rappers* by Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, in which the authors attempt to theorise numerous aspects of race, gender, violence and power in rap while simultaneously attempting to describe the pleasure they feel as “outsiders” to the genre. As the publishing blurb on the back of their book would have it, ‘the authors – white, educated, middle-class – occupy a peculiar position, at once marginal and crucial to rap’s Us and Them equations’. Near the beginning of the book Wallace constructs the ‘Us’ by describing he and his co-author as having ‘a somewhat furtive, and distinctly white taste for a certain music called rap/hip-hop’. While not explaining either what a “white taste” might be or the potential differences between the terms “rap” and hip-hop”, he does make an attempt at authenticity by expressing disdain for “commercial” acts of the time (1990) such as Tone Loc and the Beastie Boys. The authors, however furtive, know what they like, namely “serious” rap; their only problem is that this is ‘black music, of and for blacks’.¹⁷

This racial divide is commented on in other media from various angles, from white fans’ appreciation of black rap through black rappers’ acceptance and encouragement of this situation to white rappers’ (such as Eminem’s) emulation

of black rappers. Russell Potter notes the existence of ‘an anxiety framed by the dissonance between the sense that only those who actually *belong* to a certain race have a right to produce music identified with that race’.¹⁸ Racial identification is a key point in criticisms raised by black Civil Rights veterans such as Dr. C. Delores Tucker, a former Pennsylvania Secretary of State who has campaigned against gangsta rap lyrics. As Potter writes:

The broad appeal of [gangsta rap] narratives, increasingly, is the ground where battles of the (il)legitimacy of hip-hop are fought, since by one criterion, the most “authentic” raps (if being hardcore ‘gangsta’ “no radio” produces “authenticity”) are regarded by rap’s critics as the greatest signs of its *inauthenticity*.¹⁹

Such inauthenticity arises from the courtship of a mass white audience by black artists, an identification that is seen as counterproductive to the evolving struggle for racial equality. Yet the conflation of race and misogyny (and Tucker’s complaints initially concerned the latter) is something that must be questioned. The misogyny and violence in gangsta rap posit questions that link race and gender in ways not generally interrogated in the contemplation of other musical forms. The furore over gangsta rap conveniently tends to forget the misogyny present in the vast majority of popular music, what Reynolds and Press call ‘the misogynist subtext, the secret complicity in patriarchal values, that often lurks beneath the apparently subversive and libertarian.’²⁰

For Tricia Rose it is the subversive in rap that has been obscured by a focus on the gender politics of the rappers themselves rather than the racist patriarchal motives of the elite in the culture industries. For her, gender becomes racially differentiated in the minds of the dominant elite in a hegemonic shift whereby some ground is given to white women and black men at the expense of straightjacketing black women.²¹ This fusion of race and gender is taken up by Paul Gilroy. He argues that the African diaspora has produced an uncertainty of absolute racial identity and that this uncertainty is lived out in gender relations:

This may explain why so much black vernacular art treats extensively on these subjects, at times even suggesting that the intensity with which gender identity is held and gender conflicts are experienced is a consequence of racial difference. The popularity of slackness and the more misogynist forms of hip-hop can be used to support this diagnosis.²²

Such a process entails a vicious circle in which a crisis of racial identity fuels a crisis of gender relations that feed back on the making of racial identity. It is a situation which, as Gilroy says, ‘has disastrous consequences for black women who are required to submit to the forms of family life that are supposedly capable of restoring a maleness which has been damaged by the corrosive effects of white power.’ Disastrous too for black men, ‘who are invited to inhabit a toughened mode of masculinity which has been racially endorsed and invested with the special glamour of authenticity.’²³

This notion of authenticity is seen as crucial in the world of hip-hop. When Dr Dre decided to turn away from the gangsta rap he had founded with N.W.A in the late 80s, his fanbase fell away. At the end of 1999 he released *2001*, an album that reunited him with his erstwhile subject matter. He claims he was convinced to retread the old formula by his wife:

She used to play my music before we even met, so she was like, ‘You need to get back in there and get back on that hardcore shit’. It felt funny going in the studio talking about ‘this bitch’ and ‘this ho’ and how ‘I fucked this girl’ with a wife at home. But then, I have to look at it like entertainment, and I have a set fanbase, and there’s certain things they want to hear. They wanna hear Dre be Dre.’²⁴

This seems a vivid example of Gilroy’s argument. While Dre’s millionaire status hardly leaves him as trapped as others in the black community, he is seen as a representative of that community, one who must maintain his own brand of authenticity if he is to command respect from it.

There is a convergent point here in relation to comments made by Barry Shank on the “progressive country” movement of the 1970s. Essentially comprised of artists who had come to country music from other styles such as folk, rock and even jazz, the movement sought to update and re-authenticate country in response to a perceived commercialisation of the genre. Essentially based in Texas, it was seen as a countercultural take on the pop excesses of Nashville. Yet, although grounded to a certain extent in the ongoing legacies of 1960s liberalism, many artists involved in the movement found it necessary to sacrifice liberal ideas for the sake of authenticity. As Shank writes, although the music found ways to ‘signif[y] Texas’ it was a very specific signification: ‘those Texans who eat certain foods, wear certain clothes, and talk in a special way. Class lines could be crossed in Texas [...but] the racial and ethnic distinctions

could not be so easily erased'. Texan progressive country fans' and artists' claims on authenticity were in part gained by association with older discourses of being Texan, such as cowboy lore, which meant sacrificing liberalism in gender and racial politics for the lure of white male working class authenticity.²⁵

To return to rap, the distinctions made between authenticity and commercialism should alert us to the potential differences between *rap music* and *hip-hop culture*. It is generally understood that, while the terms "rap" and "hip-hop" *can* serve as synonyms for each other (as in the work of Costello and Wallace and in much popular music media), "rap" is more accurately related to a set of musical forms (rap music) and "hip-hop" to an accompanying culture that embraces music, dancing, fashion, visual style, attitude and language. Magazines such as *The Source* and *Hip-Hop Connection* are presented as reflective of this larger culture. The former styles itself as 'the magazine of hip-hop culture and politics' while the latter, in its annual Reader's Poll, includes categories for 'Best Clothing Label', 'Best Late Night Munchies' and 'Best Drink' alongside the more conventional 'Best Album', 'Best Rapper' and so on. These distinctions are reasonably clear. The complication comes, as Krims notes, when some consumers refuse to credit some "rap" as being "hip-hop", the latter term having a perceived status that the former lacks:

When this is done, the distinction is usually intended to enforce a notion of authenticity, with "hip-hop" held out as a term of validation denied to more "commercial" products. One can see that dichotomy in operation when hip-hop artists or fans denigrate a certain performer or song as "rap" while holding out some contrasting music as true hip-hop.²⁶

The "commercial" as "inauthentic" is a familiar theme in the validating of popular music. Krims gives the example of Puff Daddy as someone who is seen to produce rap music without being validated as a hip hop artist. Two years after the publication of Krims' study, Puff Daddy – now going by the name of P Diddy – could still be found to be somehow inauthentic, both in the letters pages of *Hip-Hop Connection* and in his occupation of first position in that publication's 'Homiephobic Asshole' category. In the same magazine it was possible to see how authenticity can be reclaimed by rappers after being lost. Jay-Z, one of the biggest-selling rap acts of the 1990s had lost virtually all his credibility with "serious" hip-hop fans following a string of hit singles including the *Annie-*

sampling ‘Hard Knock Life’. Yet in 2001 he released an album, *The Blueprint*, which gained such serious critical acclaim that many in the hip-hop community were persuaded to buy it. A year later the letters page of *Hip-Hop Connection* was still dominated by fans’ accounts of how they had justified buying his album and subsequently validated it. The main points in its favour appeared to be a lack of celebrity guest stars appearing on the album, a minimum of “filler” material and “smooth” production. A typical comment notes how *The Blueprint* ‘gets the balance right between jiggy/MTV and underground purist’.²⁷

As noted earlier, authenticity in rap can take very different forms. On the one hand, rappers such as Puff Daddy, mid-period Jay-Z and others are deemed inauthentic when their music is too visible - too commercial or too celebrity-endorsed - and loses its “purity”. Against such rappers are placed hip-hop purists such as Mos Def and Talib Kweli who are seen to adhere to “old skool” values in their music. What such artists might not gain in financial rewards they gain in respect from the hip-hop community and influence on other more commercial artists. Yet for other rappers, such as “gangstas” Dr. Dre, Ice Cube or Ice-T, commercialism is not a problem: authenticity is gained via a “hardcore” facade that ensures no radio play but high sales. For others in the black community, however, this kind of commercialism is inauthentic in that it relies on white identification with a ‘hyper-racialised Other’ and causes a strand of Orientalism that is ultimately unhealthy for the continuance of race relations.

The notions of authenticity mentioned above in relation to Mos Def and Talib Kweli surround the idea of tradition. A similar occurrence can be seen in country music, where the traditional and the “commercial” are often seen to be quite different entities. However, as Richard Peterson has shown, such polarisation obscures the extent to which seemingly opposing elements in country music play off each other, the fact that tradition can be (re)invented and also the fact that the “commercial” is not necessarily inauthentic. (Indeed rap acts such as The Beastie Boys and Tone Loc – so frequently criticised by Costello and Wallace can, from another point of view, be argued to be authentically maintaining the tradition of “party rap” so crucial to the music’s inception). To overcome this problem Peterson has categorised country music according to “hard-core” and “soft-shell” elements. These terms are used to differentiate music that remains rather more insular in both origin and outlook with that which blends more easily

with other styles of music. Peterson thus makes a distinction between the hard-core performer and audience for whom country is *the* music of choice (a self-contained lifestyle) and their soft-core counterparts for whom country is *a* choice among many others (*part* of a lifestyle). He contrasts numerous factors to do with appearance, song styles, public personae and audience lifestyle but it is his comments on the use of voice and lyrics in country songs that I am interested in here.

As mentioned in Chapter Two of this dissertation, the hard-core performance style tends to focus lyrically on personal life experience and very concrete situations. Hard-core performers tend to deliver their material in noticeably strong southern or south-western accents and, as mentioned in Chapter One, often employ southernisms and ground the songs in identifiable geographic locations. Vocally, the untrained voice is foregrounded to the extent that the singer appears to be “speaking” with rather than singing to his/her audience. In a particularly hard-core performer, the vocal is often nasal, implying rusticity (Roy Acuff, Hank Williams, Iris Dement), though a “close microphone” or “crooning” style might also be employed to increase the conversational nature of singer and listener (Ernest Tubb, George Jones, Merle Haggard). Soft-shell performers tend to sing in relatively accent-free standard American English (quite possibly having a marked difference between their speech and singing), to foreground a trained voice and professional microphone technique and to employ studied interpretations of songs (Kenny Rogers, John Denver, Reba McEntire, Vince Gill).²⁸

Many performers have had a foot in each camp, straying closer to one style or another depending on the target audience. Dolly Parton is an example of an artist who, while displaying many of the features of the hard-core country artist (notably accent, vocal style, lyrics, visual presentation) has been able to develop a successful pop career by focusing on “modern” material, dispensing with country instrumentation and taking some of the country “edge” off of her voice. Peterson allows that an artist may well be soft-shell in some aspects of their work while being hard-core in others. The categories, as he uses them, are not supposed to be pigeon holes in which to place performers but rather tools to use in explaining a dialectic in country music involving the interplay between hard core and soft shell. For, as he points out, the commonly accepted idea of a trend in country from

traditional roots to pop crossover is an inaccurate depiction of the music's history. Not only did country music become properly institutionalised as a genre in the mid 1950s, but the thirty years prior to this – the period of Peterson's study - saw the emergent music frequently drift between styles, from "pop" to "traditional". It is Peterson's contention that country music reinvents itself constantly in a cycle that sees one "roots" style become popularised and commercialised only to be reacted against by another "return to roots". What these roots are is never entirely clear for, as mentioned earlier, authenticity in this matter reflects the time, place and arbiters involved. It is also a 'socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered'.²⁹

During the 1990s a new approach to the country-pop style emerged with the use of rock instrumentation and arrangements by artists such as Garth Brooks, Shania Twain and Faith Hill. While not displaying all of the qualities of Peterson's "soft-shell" - for example the strained rock vocal style employed is (or, at least, *seems*) untrained - these artists have removed many of the hard-core effects still evident in a performer like Dwight Yoakam. Yoakam's vocal delivery can be seen as a direct descendant of that employed by Hank Williams. Stress is put on certain syllables and phonemic similarities are found outside the normal rhyme scheme. For example, the first verse and chorus of "The Heartaches Are Free" run as follows:

Buddy, you might think
That I've lost my mind
But mister I'd pay twice
To do it one more time

It cost a thousand tears
And wore out my knees
But buddy, that's okay
The heartaches are free³⁰

In keeping with the hard-core approach, it is a song of experience and utilises southernisms such as "buddy" and "mister". Though the rhyme scheme is *abcb* the vocal sets up a different pattern by extending the middle two lines of each verse and chorus over two bars, effectively "rhyming" "mind" with "twice" and "knees" with "kay", forming a sung *abba* scheme. The lines all end with a high nasal tone, often adding "southern" twists to words, for example pronouncing "free" as

/θɪŋk/ (0:35), making the word two syllables (with the stress on the second syllable) or “think” as /tɪŋk/ (0:09). The tune follows the criteria of the hard-core country song, particularly the 1940-50 “honky-tonk” style that Yoakam has updated to form his standard sound.³¹

In contrast here is part of the first verse and chorus of Faith Hill’s “Breathe”:

All my thoughts just seem to settle on the breeze
 When I’m lying wrapped up in your arms
 The whole world just fades away, the only thing I hear
 Is the beating of your heart

And I can feel you breathe, it’s washing over me
 Suddenly I’m melting into you
 There’s nothing left to prove, baby all we need is just to be
 Caught up in the touch, the slow and steady rush
 And baby isn’t that the way that love’s supposed to be³²

Devoid of southernisms, the song is addressed to the standard “baby” of the pop song. Hill’s lines are carefully enunciated, and, though her voice often exhibits “rockisms”, there is a clear control and avoidance of upward sliding nasal notes. When her voice swoops to a higher register on the second syllable of “supposed” (DCD Track 23, 1:31) it is entirely in keeping with the affected emotion of rock and soul singing. The verse and chorus structures are more sophisticated than in the Yoakam song and rely on the melodic and harmonic patterns of the music for their affect, providing a more vertical vocal line than the speech-like mannerisms of the rap and hard-core country song. Although fiddle and steel guitar are included in the instrumentation they are very much in the background with the foreground dominated by guitar and keyboards.

In terms of form country tends to stick to an AABA structure, with choruses or refrains emerging at the end of each A section. In a verse-chorus-verse song such as “Breathe”, the verses tend to be downplayed to allow full emotion to be displayed in the choruses, where the vocal register rises and the instrumentation fills out. The bridge section acts as a break, or point of reflection, and the same chords from the verse might be used in different order. In extreme cases, the verse can seem like something to be “got through” (like life itself in the often downbeat worldview of country) prior to the ecstasy of release in the chorus: a notable example of this is Tammy Wynette’s “Stand By Your Man” which

contains just one verse, delivered in “weeping” style, and a repeated “defiant” chorus.

The defiance in Wynette’s sung chorus raises an interesting point about sincerity, sentimentality and embarrassment in country music. As mentioned in relation to Alan Jackson earlier, one of the reasons occasionally given for the drift towards the soft-shell elements in country is the embarrassment or distaste felt by many towards elements of the hard-core approach, be it the use of fiddles and steel guitars, yodelling or “hillbilly” imagery. Yet country music is still enjoyed by people who would otherwise not associate themselves with certain of its elements. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie suggest that the voice can be a persuasive instrument in swaying opinions. Citing ‘Stand By Your Man’ they suggest it is possible to find pleasure in the song despite its seeming submissive nature due to the ‘authenticity’ of Wynette’s voice and its ‘country strength and confidence’.³³ As Richard Middleton notes, ‘it is difficult to know how and where to locate this quality [...] except in the ideology of authenticity itself’. Drawing on Barthes’ work he relates Frith and McRobbie’s findings to the “grain” of the Wynette’s voice and provides further examples:

When I hear Jimmie Rodgers’ ‘Daddy and Home’, Merle Travis’ ‘I Am A Pilgrim’ or Tennessee Ernie Ford’s ‘Sixteen Tons’, I have to force myself to foreground the sentimentality of the first, the reactionary religious fundamentalism of the second, the gimmicks and self-pitying macho quality of the third (all of which I dislike); my attention is drawn first to three male voices, working at sound quality, movement and articulation – I *know* them, their vowels, consonants, facial resonances, falsettos and all.³⁴

A similar point could be made in relation to rap music. If authenticity for some rappers, especially those involved or influenced by gangsta rap, resides in being hardcore through overt misogyny and violence, a pleasurable space can still be found for listeners out of sympathy with these elements through identification with voice, linguistic prowess and rhyme-flow. The sheer technical skills of a Dr. Dre or an Eminem combined with the rich deep tone of the former and the vocal dexterity of the latter can alone be enough to impress.

While it is difficult to clearly define hard-core and soft-shell characteristics in rap of the type Peterson finds in country music, one notable element might be the distinction between the speech-like delivery of rap and the sung elements of rap choruses (discussed in Chapter two). These techniques

effectively separate the act of rapping from any sentimentality that might be detected in the chorus line. The closing track to Dr. Dre's 2001 album, 'The Message', is an elegy for Dre's deceased brother and utilises a chorus line, sung by Mary J. Blige that simply repeats the word "listen" several times. Presented as 'a message to God' the track is lyrically sentimental with Dre finding it necessary to discard the "gangsta" persona built up throughout the album:

I done been through all emotions, from in shock, to keepin' a poker face
to straight breakin' down and showin' all emotions
I'm anxious to believe in real G's don't cry
If that's the truth, then I'm realizin I ain't no gangsta
It's just not me, but you know I'ma always ride wit you
I miss you, sometimes I wish I just died wit you³⁵

Because of Dre's rapping style, which here differs little from that found on any of his other tracks, his voice retains the authority built up from his previous raps, thus avoiding a drift into sentimentality. The sentiment in the verses' lyrics find their aural equivalent in Blige's yearning chorus lines, allowing Dre to retain his authenticity of toughness, despite what he says to the contrary in the verse quoted above.

In 'Hailie's Song', Eminem chooses not to opt for the segregation of rapped verses and sung, pop-like choruses and instead sings the first two verses and all the choruses of the track himself. The result, perhaps due to the startling difference between his rapping voice and singing voice is that the track seems oversincere, sentimental even, and lacks the authenticity of Eminem's hard-core presence. Only when he raps in the middle of the song (DCD Track 25, 2:49 to 4:12) does the "real" Eminem seem to return. It is quite possible that "hard-core" fans of Eminem's music are not able to enjoy this track through embarrassment at its sentimentality, a point borne out by fans' letters printed in *Hip-Hop Connection* in the months following the release of *The Eminem Show*.³⁶

As mentioned earlier there are several potentially embarrassing elements to traditional country music that modern practitioners of the genre seem at times to want to distance themselves from. Perhaps the most consistently iconic of these, though it is now little used, is the yodel. When Garth Brooks offers a yodel at the end of 'Night Rider's Lament' it acts largely as a signifying nod to traditional country music rather than being a distinctive part of the song. In a

version by Jerry Jeff Walker, a more hard-core type of performer, the closing is very much in keeping with the spirit of the song, a paean to country life over that of the city. Walker yodels for a full minute, interjecting spoken southernisms ('He sang like ol' Proviarti boys', 'Well, the way I figure it, they just traded in buffalo chips for microchips') before ending on a high note yodel that wavers ever higher towards falsetto. The yodel is a common feature in the music of Hank Williams, where it is normally used to extend certain words, for example 'lo-wo-wo-wo-wonesome' in 'Lovesick Blues'. Dwight Yoakam's vocal extensions of certain words (mentioned earlier) are directly influenced by this style of singing.³⁷

While there is no direct equivalent to the yodel in rap music, which largely dispenses with the melismatic singing style common to soul music (the exception being certain sung choruses), we could cite the use of vocal scratching to create a comparable effect. Here, instead of the musical elements of a backing track being scratched, part of the rapper's vocal line is sampled and replayed in repeated fragments, producing a kind of artificial melisma. The effect, much like melismatic singing in other genres, is to interrupt the lyrical flow and foreground the expressive nature of vocal sound. Sampling, unlike yodelling, maintains a non-embarrassing – or, as it is often termed in postmodern discourse, *knowing* - distance between vocal expression and the person expressing through the diffusion of sampling technology.

This sense of knowingness is central to the modern variation of country music most frequently termed "alternative country". As Richard Peterson has noted, alternative country as a genre has come to be seen as the latest form of hard core in the ongoing dialectic of country music. An almost meaningless term inasmuch as it is impossible to categorise stylistically, alternative country has developed into a set of beliefs that place themselves in opposition to commercial country music. Often emerging from areas outside the institutionalised centre of country music in Nashville, alternative country embraces forms of bluegrass (Gillian Welch), Western Swing (Wayne Hancock), country rock (Uncle Tupelo, Wilco, Son Volt, The Jayhawks), "traditional" honky-tonk (Dale Watson, Robbie Fulks) and "traditional" American folk music performed with a new twist (The Handsome Family, Bonnie "Prince" Billy). In short the term is used for a wide variety of artists deemed 'too country and/or too adventurous for regular mainstream country airplay'.³⁸

Alternative country has allowed access to country music for many fans who might not otherwise have been interested in the genre. In doing so it seems to contradict one of the key points made by Peterson regarding hard-core and soft-shell styles, namely that hard-core music is justified as being ‘by and for those steeped in the tradition [of authentic country music]’ while soft-core styles are ‘enjoyable to the much larger numbers of those not born into or knowledgeable about country music’.³⁹ Many performers and fans of alternative country have come from other non-country genres and hence are neither ‘steeped in the tradition’ nor necessarily knowledgeable about country music. As the Whiskeytown song would have it, ‘I started this damn country band/cos’ punk rock was too hard to play’.⁴⁰ At the same time, both fans and performers have shown a staunch defence of their preferred styles and a healthy ability, aided especially by the Internet, to produce, distribute, find and purchase the products of what remains a minority genre in the face of the major label-backed commercial country music industry. The popularity of alternative country in Europe (as evidenced by the number of alternative country artists signed to European labels and the extensive European tours such artists undergo) is also a sign that the new defenders of authentic country may well not be those born into a tradition.⁴¹

However, as suggested earlier, there is always the possibility once a music genre is taken out of its “natural” habitat that it suffers the possibility of being used as a reference point to some kind of authenticity rather than being inherently authentic itself. Alternative country allows both audience and performer access to the pleasures of country music without restrictions. Many transfer notions of authenticity constructed in other genres such as rock or “alternative music”. An artist like Bonnie “Prince” Billy, for all his aura of Appalachian traditionalism, allows a link back to the world of rock music that a performer like Ralph Stanley doesn’t. This echoes an observation made by Barry Shank in relation to progressive country in the 1970s, which was essentially an earlier form of alternative country. Shank claims that the young fans and performers that made up the progressive country movement staked a claim on authenticity through ‘irony, detachment, and rough sincerity [...], along with a combination of a respect for cultural traditions and a weary resignation about the legacies they imply’.⁴² The combination of sincerity and irony is clearly a contradictory one yet it is as palpable as the mix of sincerity and pastiche found in

more recent country-related projects like the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which manages to lampoon country traditions while presenting a factually-accurate depiction of country music-making in the first half of the twentieth century.

Through being such a meticulously researched project, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* provides a useful link to what Richard Peterson terms ‘authenticity work’. By this he means the effort made by producers of country music to fit in with their fans’ expectations of authenticity. In filmmaking there is a far more obvious example of this kind of work as verisimilitude in scenery, context, speech and acting is essential to the suspension of disbelief. In music-making this aspect of “work” is generally not considered, partly because the ideology of authenticity is so strong that it is generally assumed that performers are doing no more than acting naturally. However, as Peterson points out the very oxymoronic nature of the phrase “act naturally” provides a clue as to the occasionally *unnatural* aspects that make up the facade of authenticity.⁴³

To conclude by returning to the artists quoted at the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that a performer like Terry Allen, who is nearer to the modern conception of a multimedia artist than a “straight” country singer because of his additional work in the visual arts and theatre, has a lot of authenticity work to do if he is to be taken seriously in country music. *Lubbock (on everything)* provides a clue as to how he goes about this by closing with a sentimental country waltz celebrating his fidelity to his wife and homeland. There is no irony on show in ‘The Thirty Years Waltz’ and nothing to suggest that Allen takes his listeners, his wife, his region or country music anything less than seriously.

Meanwhile, the questions raised about Eminem’s authenticity illustrate a contradictory element in the production-consumption relationships of hip-hop, namely that many black rappers had no problem with selling their product to a mass white audience while initially criticising a white ‘pretender’ for appropriating a black art form. Perhaps they felt the history of white appropriation of black creativity tending to favour the white made this of little consequence, that they would continue being rappers while Eminem would become a pop star. However there is an assumption implicit in this that becoming a star is the desired place to be for anyone involved in the pop music industry, an assumption that is at odds with rap’s claims for authenticity. Nelson George’s put down of Eminem as

‘*just* a pop star’ shows the disdain reserved for pop stardom when weighed against hip-hop credibility. As Talib Kweli points out, Eminem is far from being *just* pop: ‘He’s pop, he’s hip-hop, he’s underground, he’s white, he’s rock, he’s commercial, he’s offensive, kids love him.’ Though Kweli agrees with George that Eminem would be less likely to be a media sensation were he black, he also indicates the extent to which the rapper has succeeded in his authenticity work:

People don’t understand the context of where he’s coming from. They don’t understand that he’s had a really rough life, the sort of life that most of us either can’t relate to or just have no idea about. And two, they don’t understand what it took for him to get to where he got to be. They don’t understand the context of the battle-rhyming world, of what you have to say to take somebody apart who is in front of you. And that’s the aesthetic that Eminem comes from.⁴⁴

Notes

¹ Terry Allen, ‘Amarillo Highway’, Track 1 on *Lubbock (on everything)* by Terry Allen (Special Delivery SPDCD 1007, 1991). DCD Track 20 [excerpt].

² Eminem, ‘Without me’, Track 10 on *The Eminem Show* by Eminem (Aftermath/Interscope 493 327-2, 2002). DCD Track 21 [excerpt].

³ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁴ Chris Willman, ‘Cat in the Hat’ in *Entertainment Weekly*, #644, 15th June 2002, p. 28. Further references to this article will appear as page references in the text.

⁵ Peterson, *Creating Country*, p. 205.

⁶ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 48.

⁷ ‘Bite Back’, *Hip-Hop Connection*, #158, April 2002, p. 9.

⁸ Simon Reynolds. ‘This is spinal rap’ in *Uncut*, May 2000, p.89.

⁹ For detailed explanations of these and other genres see Krims, pp. 54-80.

¹⁰ Mark Anthony Neal. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p.163.

¹¹ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), p.142.

¹² Quoted in Burhan Wazir, “Misogynist, homophobe...hero”, *The Observer Review*, 18 June 2000, p.5.

¹³ Kodwo Eshun. *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet, 1998, pp.-005—004.

¹⁴ Jeremy J. Beadle. *Will Pop Eat Itself?: Pop Music in the Soundbite Era*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993 p.91.

¹⁵ Jason Toynbee. *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*. London: Arnold, 2000, p.121.

¹⁶ Beadle, *Pop*, p.76.

¹⁷ Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace. *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1990), p. 21.

¹⁸ Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 94.

¹⁹ Potter, p. 94.

²⁰ Reynolds and Press, p. xiii.

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- ²¹ Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, p.104.
- ²² Paul Gilroy *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. London: Serpent's Tail, p.7.
- ²³ Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p.8.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Ekow Eshun, 'The Rap Trap', *The Guardian Weekend*, May 27 2000, p.8.
- ²⁵ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 58.
- ²⁶ Krims, p. 10.
- ²⁷ 'Bite Back', *Hip-Hop Connection*, #158, April 2002, p. 9.
- ²⁸ Peterson, *Creating Country*, pp. 137-155; see also Richard A. Peterson, 'The Dialectic of Hard-Core and Soft-Shell Country Music' in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars and Honky-Tonk Bars* ed. by Cecilia Tichi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 234-255.
- ²⁹ Peterson, *Creating Country*, p. 5.
- ³⁰ Dwight Yoakam, 'The Heartaches Are Free', Track 10 on *Tomorrow's Sounds Today* (Reprise 9362-47827-2, 2000). DCD Track 22 [excerpt].
- ³¹ The instrumental features of hard-core and soft-core country music are outside the scope of this essay. For more detail see Peterson, *Creating Country*, p. 152.
- ³² Faith Hill, 'Breathe', Track 4 on *Breathe* (Warner Bros. 9362-48084-2, 2000). DCD Track 23 [excerpt].
- ³³ Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie. 'Rock and Sexuality' in *Screen Education*, 29, 1978, p. 4. Quoted in Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 263.
- ³⁴ Middleton, pp. 263-264.
- ³⁵ Dr. Dre, 'The Message', Track 22 on *2001* (Aftermath/Interscope 490 486-2, 1999). DCD Track 24 [excerpt].
- ³⁶ Eminem, 'Hailie's Song', Track 14 on *The Eminem Show*. DCD Track 25. For an example of fans' criticisms see *Hip-Hop Connection* #162, August 2002, p. 9.
- ³⁷ Garth Brooks, 'Night Rider's Lament', Track 9 on *The Chase* (Liberty/EMI 0777 7 98743 2 3, 1992); Jerry Jeff Walker, 'Night Rider's Lament', Track 7 on *Gypsy Songman* (Rykodisc RCD 20071, 1987); Hank Williams, 'Lovesick Blues' Track 3 on Disc One of *40 Greatest Hits* (Polydor 821 233-2, 1988). Excerpts from Walker's and Brooks' yodels are DCD Tracks 26 and 27 respectively.
- ³⁸ Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal. 'Alternative Country: Origins, Music, World-view, Fans, and Taste in Genre Formation' available at Vanderbilt University website *Alternative Country*, URL <http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~steve.lee/country.html> (accessed 13th July 2002). This essay also appeared in *Popular Music and Society*, 2001.
- ³⁹ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 150.
- ⁴⁰ Whiskeytown, 'Faithless Street', on *Faithless Street* (Outpost OPD 30002, 1998).
- ⁴¹ Dale Watson, one of the foremost proponents of "authentic" honky-tonk country provides a good case in point. Unable to secure an American-based label for some years now, he has put CDs out on English and Dutch labels. He has also put out a live album, *Preachin' to the Choir*, recorded in front of an enthusiastic London crowd.
- ⁴² Shank, p. 62.
- ⁴³ Peterson, *Creating Country*, pp. 211-225.
- ⁴⁴ Nathan Rabin, Interview with Talib Kweli on website *The Onion A.V. Club*, URL <http://www.theavclub.com/avclub3640/avfeature3640.html> (accessed 15th March 2002).

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to show how a comparison of certain key themes in two seemingly unrelated musical genres might contribute to ongoing attempts to map the relevance of popular music to the lived realities of certain individuals and groups. In doing so I have highlighted some of the ways in which these themes are embedded in the texts of country and rap songs. I do not pretend to have covered all the avenues of investigation thrown up by my chosen themes. There is much more to be said, for example, about regional variation in rap and country at both local and global levels. There is also scope for a developed analysis of the importance of tradition in these genres, a subject covered only briefly here. For a piece of work that embraces issues of identity politics there are also obvious omissions, the most notable perhaps being any serious discussion of gender. These are just some of the areas that might benefit from lengthier and more detailed study. However, I hope I have at least engaged with enough aspects of identity and identification to make credible the pertinence of further potential research into these areas.

Underlying much of the analysis in these chapters is a desire to maintain an engagement between popular music and history. This engagement can be seen both in terms of the history *of* popular music and history *via* popular music. The former can be seen as the need to chronicle and preserve musical traditions and individual musical texts. Though this can largely be carried out via the products of the commercialised world of popular music - records, CDs, videos, television programmes - there is still space for the objective eye of historical study to trace the extra-musical narrative surrounding the music's production and to find the links that help weave the music into a wider tapestry. Whether this process takes place through the written word or through a singer or rapper adopting a predecessor's style or song, the desire remains to treat the music of the past with the same respect afforded any other art form. In these ways we bear witness on what musicians have done and the paths music has followed.

Working from the opposite direction there are ways that popular music can inform the study of history and this is one reason why, for many people, the

need to identify with music is such a strong one. The themes identified in this dissertation tie in with this desire as place, race, memory and experience are all part of individuals' engagement with their history. In these ways musicians can bear witness on what we as people have done and on the paths we have followed. We as fans can fulfil our own function as witnesses as we take our place in the constituencies that are built up around musical texts, performances and scenes.

In doing so we often feel the need to place importance on the authenticity of those we choose to represent us and on ourselves as members of their constituency. Yet to say this in a world which apparently has become impossible to describe as anything other than postmodern is to be over-simplistic for it becomes increasingly clear that we must talk about "constituencies" as a plural experience. For the majority of people with access to mass communications media popular music, like the wider popular culture, is available in a bewildering array of forms. As such it can still be a lived reality but it may seem more akin to a rented one. The view of postmodernism that what we gain in choice we lose in depth and involvement could be brought to bear on the issues at play here to argue that, with complete identification with any *single* musical form impossible for probably the majority of listeners, authenticity - indeed, all the themes of this dissertation - becomes irrelevant.

Clearly I don't see this to be the case and believe this is where the usefulness of viewing musical forms in terms of their hard-core and soft-shell elements comes into play. Looking at the dialectic created by hard core and soft shell and relating it back to the ways lived experience is reflected in popular music - and in country and rap especially - we can see a series of acceptances of and challenges to the status quo. The equilibrium and momentum created by these elements seem to rather accurately reflect those experienced in everyday life and it is such reflections that keep us coming back to music.

APPENDIX ONE

CONTENTS OF CD

Full references are given in the footnotes accompanying the main text.

Chapter One

1. Steve Earle, 'Someday' [excerpt]
2. Steve Earle, 'Guitar Town' [excerpt]
3. Jay-Z, 'The City Is Mine' [excerpt]
4. Steve Earle, 'Hillbilly Highway'
5. Mos Def, 'Mr. Nigga'
6. Mos Def, 'Rock N Roll'
7. Earthling, '1st Transmission' [excerpt]
8. Jay-Z, 'Where I'm From'
9. Alan Jackson, 'Where I Come From'

Chapter Two

10. Merle Haggard, 'Are The Good Times Really Over For Good'
11. Merle Haggard, 'Wishing All These Old Things Were New' [excerpt]
12. Merle Haggard, 'My Favorite Memory'
13. Talib Kweli, 'Memories Live'
14. Eminem, 'Stan' [excerpt - final section]
15. Iris Dement, 'My Life'
16. Merle Haggard, 'Big City' [excerpt]
17. Iris Dement, 'Big City' [excerpt]
18. Jerry Jeff Walker, 'David & Me'
19. Eric B. & Rakim, 'Paid In Full'

Chapter Three

20. Terry Allen, 'Amarillo Highway' [excerpt]
21. Eminem, 'Without Me' [excerpt]
22. Dwight Yoakam, 'The Heartaches Are Free' [excerpt]
23. Faith Hill, 'Breathe' [excerpt]
24. Dr. Dre, 'The Message' [excerpt]
25. Eminem, 'Hailie's Song'
26. Jerry Jeff Walker, yodel from 'Night Rider's Lament' [excerpt]
27. Garth Brooks, yodel from 'Night Rider's Lament' [excerpt]

APPENDIX TWO

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

Pronunciations are given using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The symbols used, with their values, are as follows:

Consonants

b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w and *z* have their usual English values. Other symbols are used as follows:

ɣ	(get)	N	(ring)	Σ	(she)
τΣ	(chip)	T	(thin)	Z	(decision)
δZ	(jar)	Δ	(this)	φ	(yes)
ξ	(loch)				

Vowels

short vowels

Θ	(cat)
ε	(bed)
↔	(ago)
I	(sit)
□	(hot)
ø	(run)
Y	(put)

long vowels

A]	(arm)
ι]	(see)
□]	(saw)
∈]	(her)
υ]	(too)

diphthongs

εI	(day)
αI	(my)
□ I	(boy)
↔Y	(no)
αY	(how)
I↔	(near)
ε↔	(hair)
Y↔	(poor)
αI↔	(fire)
αY↔	(sour)

The main or primary stress of a word is shown by □ preceding the relevant syllable. Where appropriate weaker syllables are separated by □ .

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